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DeRay Mckesson
Mckesson's decision to quit his $110,000-a-year job as a school administrator and join the Ferguson protests made headlines in 2015. He has been a household name ever since. "This world can be better," says the magnetic Black Lives Matter organizer. He talks race, activism and America in Making the Hard Case for Hope.

Karen Lynch
The talented collage artist says that "resuscitating and transforming long-forgotten pieces of the past into colorful, surreal, retro-futuristic landscapes" is a central theme of her work. Lynch's faux-idyllic quad scene, complete with darkly gathering storm clouds, accompanies The Campus Consent Crisis.

Luis Gomez (Universe 137 Studios)
an internationally renown photographer, producer, editor, videographer and musician, whose work is published worldwide. Luis Gomez is known as a guitar player and exclusive artist signed by Gibson guitars and producer and filmmaker. Luis Gomez is the CEO of Universe 137 Studios And Chicas Universe 137 working with more than 40 magazines.

Hernan Diaz
Diaz grew up in Argentina and Sweden, studied in London and now lives in New York, where he is associate director of the Hispanic Institute at Columbia University. He was a finalist for the 2018 Pulitzer Prize, as well as for the PEN/Faulkner Award, for his debut novel. 1,111 Emblems is Diaz's first short story for playboy.

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ON THE COVER *Laura Lydall, photography by Brian B Hayes*

No 10 October 2018

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WELCOME TO THE PLAYBOY CLUB

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GALLERIES

Live the Dream

We held our Midsummer Night's Dream party at Marquee Nightclub at the Cosmopolitan of Las Vegas in July. Couldn't nab a ticket? Head over to Playboy.com to unlock an exclusive NSFW pictorial inspired by the enchanted evening.

READ

The Trump Machine

With midterms near, it's safe to say the US is still deeply divided and President Donald Trump's MAGA base is more loyal than ever. Political columnist Art Tavana explores how POTUS continues to appeal to the everyman.

EXCLUSIVES

Lean Back and Relax

"Pegging is a more common sexual desire than many people probably think," says columnist and Kinsey Institute research fellow Justin Lehmiller. The sex scientist, whose new book, *Tell Me What You Want*, is out now, explores the culture and stigma of fetishism every month on Playboy.com.

PRODUCTS

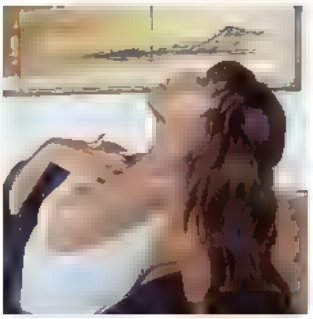
Pack Your Bags

Let PlayboyShop.com be your official back-to-school outfitter with our new line of backpacks, gym bags, fall tees and cozy hoodies. Want extra credit? Sign up for Playboy's e-newsletters, covering the worlds of sex, pop culture and beautiful women, and receive discounts or free shipping.

MEMBERSHIP

Beautiful Beatriz

Stephanie Beatriz has turned heads as one of TV's most sexually liberated characters on Brooklyn Nine-Nine, relocating from FOX to NBC this fall. In her Playboy.com profile, the actress gets frank about her much talked-about role and coming out—twice—as bisexual.



LET'S PLAY

YEHA LEUNG

Her lingerie has adorned the bodies of Cardi B, Nicki Minaj and Rihanna, but 26-year-old designer Yeha Leung has more in mind than VIP co-signs. "My goal isn't to just add celebrities to a list like I'm capturing rare Pokémon," says the Brooklyn native. "I started my business for people who are hungry for the same aesthetic." For Leung, that aesthetic took root in an early fascination with Blond Ambition–era Madonna and Asian horror films. She launched Creepyyeha in 2011, and it swiftly morphed from a Tumblr hobby to a high-profile personal brand. These days, customers wait up to nine weeks for their orders as Leung painstakingly crafts each piece. Offering harnesses, garters, chokers and even chain mail, Creepyyeha at once captures hyperfeminine daintiness and a forceful raciness that wouldn't be out of place in a BDSM dungeon. "I've always been drawn to things that have a dark twist in them," she says. "There's a power in being both submissive and dominating." But perhaps the brand's most subversive quality is the fact that its designs beg to be worn in public. As Leung puts it, "Lingerie shouldn't just be seen in the bedroom." —*Anita Little*

PHOTOGRAPHY BY
KYLE DELEU

Planet Earth Goes to Washington

Scientists argue that the solution to global warming could be as plain as dirt. But will politicians listen?

BY **JOSH TICKELL**

Melting icebergs, megastorms and heat waves may still raise Al Gore's hackles, but for many of us, signs of a faltering climate just add to what Norwegian climate expert Per Espen Stoknes calls "apocalypse fatigue." In other words: Sorry, polar bears, we're over it.

With all the bad news about our planet, it may come as a surprise that there's a possible solution to global warming, and that it involves a most common thing: dirt.

Since the birth of the industrial revolution circa 1750, humankind has added about 1,000 billion tons (a.k.a. gigatons) of carbon dioxide to the atmosphere. It's called the "legacy load" of CO_2. Even if we converted our global society to solar panels and Teslas tomorrow, that mass of gas would still be up there, wreaking havoc on our climate.

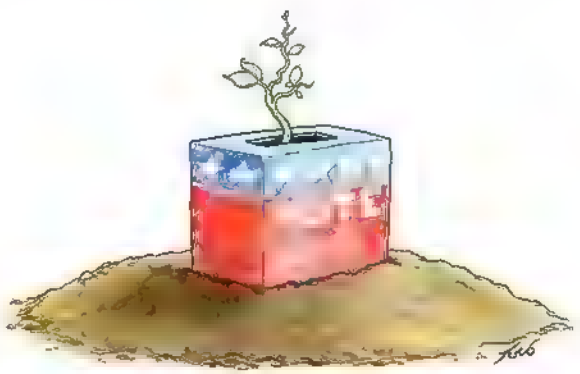
There's only one way out of this mess, and that's to move the legacy load somewhere else. But where? It's already in the atmosphere, and we can't put more of it into the oceans; both are maxed out with the stuff. That leaves one place large enough to store all that CO_2: the soil.

Fortunately, there's a mechanism for putting it there. Photosynthesising plants, working with the billions of microorganisms in the earth, naturally dismantle CO_2, releasing the oxygen back into the atmosphere and storing the carbon underground. That's why a growing movement of farmers, ranchers and climate-conscious organisations wants to increase the carbon content of our soils. They call the solution "regenerative agriculture," and supporters include former San Francisco mayor and current California gubernatorial candidate Gavin Newsom and renowned food author Michael Pollan.

How much carbon can we store in the world's soil? According to Paul Hawken, editor of Drawdown: The Most Comprehensive Plan Ever Proposed to Reverse Global Warming, by practising carbon-sequestering regenerative agriculture, combined with better-known solutions such as solar, wind and energy efficiency, we could reverse global warming within three decades.

Things look even brighter when you consider the other benefits of storing more carbon in our soil — things we'll need in order to make society livable for the 10 billion humans who will be sharing the planet by 2050 (according to UN population predictions). Those benefits could include growing more — and more nutritious — food, restoring lost ecosystems, turning certain deserts into forests and providing tens of millions of new jobs globally.

Regenerative agriculture is already being used on large-scale farms of 5,000 acres in the United States and hundreds of thousands of acres in other countries, including Mexico. It involves replicable and scalable techniques, herding packs of cows across the land to build deep-rooted grasses, keeping soil protected with cover crops, practising no-till methods and minimising or eliminating the use of synthetic fertilisers and pesticides. In many cases, soil has been built back after just a year.



While some believe the world's soils can't store enough carbon to curb temperature rise, agricultural scientists are bullish on soil-based carbon capture. This is why France, which has the largest soil-science program in Europe, has come up with the "4 per 1000" program, which aims to increase soil carbon globally by 0.4 percent per year, thereby mitigating humanity's yearly emissions.

But in the U.S., our current legislative system rewards the confinement of livestock and the destruction of soils. It works by giving farmers minimum price guarantees for commodity crops, corn and soy being the largest. Those guarantees stipulate the use of soil-destroying chemicals and agriculture. Once grown, the majority of those crops are given to feedlot animals that themselves emit tremendous amounts of greenhouse gas.

All this is codified in the nearly 1,000-page Farm Bill, which expires in September and is due to be revised. Granted, for the first time, the proposed new bill has stipulations for soil health — a win for the 120 organisations represented by the National Sustainable Agriculture Coalition, which lobbies Congress for greener agriculture. But when I ask a former 30-year employee of the U.S. Department of Agriculture about the bill, he responds, "You can put a gold ring in a pig's nose, but it's still a pig." Unless new legislation gets farmers off the chemical teat, American soils won't draw down carbon anytime soon.

What's needed isn't just legislation that deals with soils as the single greatest potential global solution, but a new political process in which lawmakers can't be bought and paid for by chemical and fossil-fuel companies. That would require a plurality of progressive parties (including greens and socialists) and a raft of democracy upgrades such as ranked-choice voting and the end of gerrymandering. Hope may rest with a new crop of millennial politicians who are bucking the system, including Representative Tulsi Gabbard, a Democrat from Hawaii, and socialist-progressive Alexandria Ocasio-Cortez in New York.

Millennials are the largest voting bloc in the history of the U.S., and more young people are registering to vote every day. The 2018 midterm elections mark the beginning of a two-year race to disrupt the status quo. Millennials (and woke people of all generations). ■

ILLUSTRATION BY **TOM TORO**

PLAYBOY PROUDLY PRESENTS

DRAWN DATA

ILLUSTRATED BY TIMBA

NEW EDITION

SEPT/OCT '18

SIGNIFICA, INSIGNIFICA, STATS AND FACTS

THANKS, BESSIE

3,000

estimated number of **COWS** required to create one season's worth of NFL footballs

DREAM ON

number of **FANTASY-SPORTS** players last year in the U.S. and Canada

estimated value of **FANTASY-SPORTS** industry

OVER THE LINE

$20,000

NO Flipping

AVERAGE LENGTH OF REGULAR-SEASON NFL GAMES LAST YEAR

$513 MILLION

amount advertisers spent on commercials during NFL games last September

70 average number of commercials that ran during 2016 NFL games

More MONEY

$75K

annual income that research shows makes people HAPPIEST

VS.

More PROBLEMS

$95K

salary point above which emotional well-being and life satisfaction DECLINE

Button SMASHERS

viewers who tuned in to watch Drake play *Fortnite* live

2022 year that e-sports will be a medal event at the Asian Games

2024 year the Olympics may include gaming as a demonstration sport

Oompah-pah!

120K beer mugs confiscated from fest-goers trying to smuggle them out

liters of beer drunk during Germany's 2017 Oktoberfest

127 oxen prepared and served at the fest

14 hours per year it is illegal to "possess, use, sell or distribute" **BILLY EYELID** in public in Hollywood, California (all of Halloween and half the following day)

$1,000 FINE FOR VIOLATING THIS ORDINANCE

Safety IN NUMBERS

62

percentage of hetero singles who would consider a **THREESOME**

READY FOR HALLOWEEN

$325K value of Robert Downey Jr.'s original *Iron Man* costume, stolen from storage

$300K amount paid at auction for Elvis's 1974 peacock design jumpsuit

$8,054 [illegible] Green Light video

$7,088 auction price paid for Nicki Minaj's black lace bodysuit

PASSEL of PUMPKINS

90–95 percentage of U.S.-processed pumpkins grown in Illinois

80 percentage of the country's pumpkin supply available in October

$185,764,000 value of U.S. pumpkin production in 2017

Scent-ual Seduction

40

PET PARTY

$420 million estimated amount U.S. consumers spent on Halloween costumes for their pets in 2016

#InstaBANNED

For visual artists, Instagram is a blessing and a curse. We rounded up nine deleted posts in an attempt to discern the platform's famously fine line between art and smut

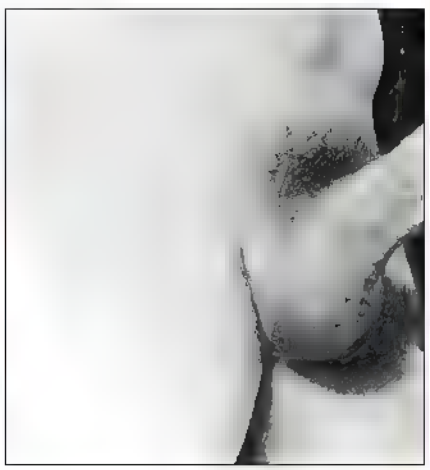
BY **ZACH SOKOL**

"Instagram is like a business card on steroids for visual artists," says Emily Miller, a 27-year-old New York–based painter who regularly sells her artwork off the sprawling photo-sharing site. Having surpassed a billion monthly users earlier this year, Instagram has become a powerful tool for Miller and her ilk, allowing them to bypass the gatekeepers of the white-cube gallery world and build ever more independent and financially viable careers. But it's not all prayer-hands emojis. While Instagram has democratised the art world to a substantial degree, it has also introduced new powers that be. Censorship algorithms, easily offended users and shadowy moderators all have the power to decide if certain images are too "explicit." And it can take only one report to get a post taken down.

When it comes to photography, Instagram's no-female-nipples policy is well-known—though it should be said that "postmastectomy scarring and women actively breast-feeding" have been allowed since 2015. The service's community guidelines state that "nudity in photos of paintings and sculptures is okay," but many artists working in those mediums beg to differ. A surrealist illustration of hardcore sex may fly, while a figurative painting of a vulva could get flagged within minutes. Given that moral and aesthetic grey area (not to mention our own historic trials in this realm), we thought it might be illuminating to gather a range of artwork that has been taken down from the platform, accompanied by the creators' thoughts on social-media censorship.

EMILY MILLER @familykiller

"Instagram is a huge beast. I can't begin to imagine how they monitor all the content. It will take tremendous effort to get the algorithm right. I bet IG's censorship and promotions are changing the course of art history in ways we're not aware of yet."

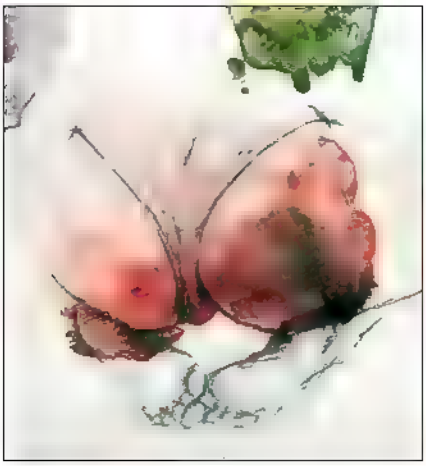


FRANCES WAITE @francesawaite

"At this point I'm able to predict the types of drawings that will be reported. It's silly. I'm always a little sad when it happens, but Instagram is just Instagram: The drawings still exist. Sometimes I try to think of it as a victory: The drawing was too good."

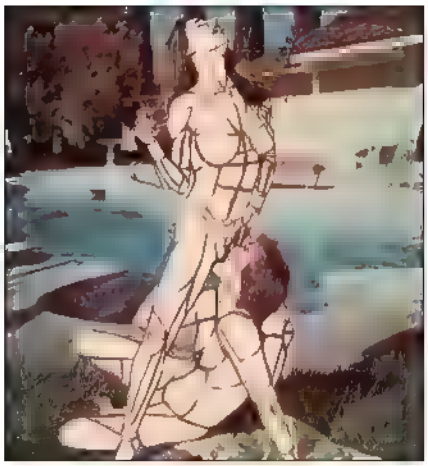
NATALIE KRIM @nataliekrim

"Users should have the ability to engineer their experience through an expansive set of controls. Seemingly little flags, filters and notifications go a long way; it's a good place to start so that the power of what you see is in your hands."



DESSIE JACKSON @dessiejackson

"I think this relates to a larger, overarching theme of history and art history since the beginning of time. What are women 'allowed' to create as artists? Inequality is forever present, what, as artists and viewers, can we do to neutralise this schism?"

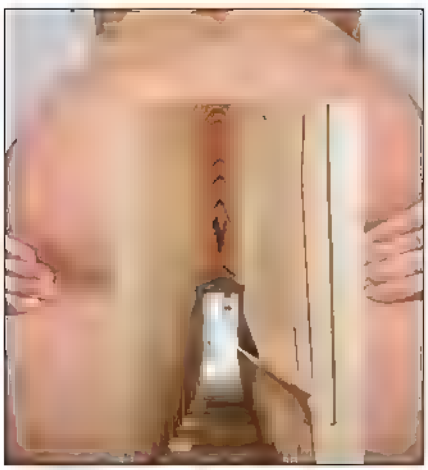


ZOË LIGON @thongria

"Humans review the content, so it's most likely a reflection of society's hang-ups with femme bodies. Regardless of the age, gender, etc. of the moderator, we're all predisposed to be more critical of the taboo feminine than the taboo masculine."

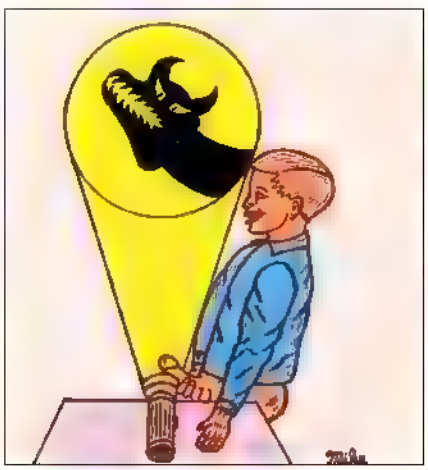
HEATHER BENJAMIN @heatherbenjamin_

"If I let Instagram dictate what I post, I wouldn't be sharing half the work I want to, which defeats the purpose of using this platform. Deep down, I wish people would keep posting content, uncensored, over and over. Maybe that would get us somewhere."



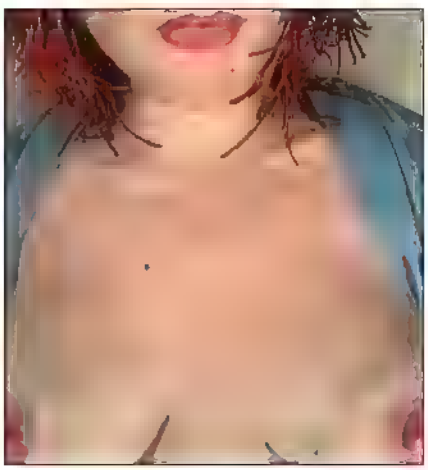
GIULIA MARSICO @scientwhat

"Sometimes my work so closely resembles something 'explicit' that the viewer ends up conflicted (or offended), not realizing they've completely sexualised a bridge or the Iglesia de San Pedro. Ooh, you don't like that, do you?"



MIKE DIANA @balledinthediana

"Instagram makes me think of the DMV or the post office—how certain employees really want to control or bully other people. With the moderators, you never know who's going to be the stickler who doesn't let anything slide."



SHONA MCANDREW @shona_mcandrew

"The truth is these problems exist on Instagram because they exist IRL. Female nipples are censored while male nipples are not because of how society views women's bodies and men's bodies — the algorithm came later."

Amanda LAUREN

Photography by **WILL SANTILLO** *Publishing* **@SHANDREWPR**
Make up by **@NYSSAMAKUP** *Text by* **NELLY MADUNA**
Model **@INSTAMANDA LAUREN**

Describe yourself in three words.
Independent, free-thinker and loyal

Were you excited to shoot for Playboy?
Words are superfluous. Beyond exc ted to say the least!

What was it like starting out as a model?
I came into the game a little late. I didn't pursue modell ng until after my undergraduate degree was completed and was studying for my Master's. There is definitely a learning curve, particularly in this digital age where social media has changed the nature of model ing. Nonetheless, I feel personally challenged to deliver the best content I can and continue to grow my brand

What would you consider to be your biggest challenge as a model so far?
have learned to take the adv ce of other professionals, such as photographers and make-up art sts a bit more seriously. have a great imagination and can be qu te creative, but not everything translates on camera the way you imagine it would

Describe your perfect day off when you are not modelling.
On most if not all days, I'm at the gym in the morning and 'm stil. in the process of finishing my Master's degree. I do l ke to spend t me with my dog and the people I love the most. Social zing, especially at night over a nice dinner or some cocktails is one way I relax.

Do you feel more like a city person or a country person?
Definitely city as far as living goes. I love the livelihood and action of a city.

If you could live anywhere in the world, where would it be?
Probably doing as I am now as a global citizen, so to speak. I'm currently renting an apartment in Paris wh.ch is my stopping ground for roughly half of the year. I have been spending equal time in London and when I am not there, I am visiting other parts of the world or spending time with fam ly back in the United States

Do you have a secret talent?
I can read people like a psychic. I'm highly intuitive and w thin a very short amount of time, I usually have the bas cs of people figured out quite eas ly

A guilty pleasure?
The Bachelor, The Bachelorette, and Bachelor in Paradise. Gu lty as charged

Which song is absolutely certain to make you cry whenever you hear it?
V adimir Martynov: The Beatitudes from the movie La Grande Bellezza

What is your favourite word in any language and what does it mean?
Any word in Ital an or French is beautifu. no matter what it means

Any last words you would like to share with the readers?
Thank you for your support and I look forward to making it over to Australia sooner rather than later.

Madrigal

FICTION BY **JOHN WRAY**

The day ends with a call from her insufferable brother. Insufferable when he calls, carping endlessly on about a portfolio of problems that anyone not living in the culture capital of the world would be grateful to have — Quaker schools and alternate-side parking and something actually called "mansion tax" and even worse during those stretches of absolute radio silence in which it's obvious that he could take or leave the family altogether. He launches straight into his feud with Hunter Wagoner, the latest middle-aged white Southern writer whose Moment has proved slightly more extensive and sparkly than her brother's own Moment, but for the first time in more than 10 years of this unvarying, soul-killing rite of auto-pietà she cuts him off.

"I don't have time for this shit, Teddy."

"What's that?"

"You heard me. No more Hunter Wagoner."

"I feel the same way, Maddy. Believe me. The thing is, though, that's exactly what Hunter—"

"I could recite all the stuff you're about to tell me down to the tiniest, most piddling detail. I'm even pretty sure about the order."

"All right. Sure. I just—"

"I know that his book got on the cover of the *TBR* and yours didn't, even though his was just a story collection, and I know that everyone raves about the humour in his writing in spite of the fact that he's not actually funny, and I know that you once heard him hitting on a grad student at a party by telling her about the year he spent reading nothing but the New Testament, and I know that it worked. Can we skip to the part where I tell you that you have a better ear?"

A long silence. Change being registered.

"Okay."

"Okay."

"I was calling to ask about your new meds, actually. That's why I called. You're right about Wagoner. Fuck that guy up the ass."

She says nothing to that.

"Maddy? You there?"

"I'm not on any new meds."

He actually laughs. "There's probably some new term for them now, like Best Life Enablers, but you obviously know—"

"I'm not taking the Paxil anymore. I'm not taking the Zoloft. I'm just not taking them."

A more profound silence. Corroded gears turning.

"I was talking to Dad today, which is maybe another reason I called. He seemed kind of concerned."

"I know it's a cliché to say you never call," she tells him, "Or that you only call when you want something from me."

"You're right, Mads. That is a cliché."

"But you never call."

"How can you say that? Here we are—"

"Or you only call when you want something from me."

"I'm sorry, Maddy. I'm sorry. Okay? I love you very much. I love you and I'm worried about you. Are you yawning?"

"I love you too, Teddy."

"It's just—you're not always the easiest person to talk to, you know? And I'm not the easiest person."

"Somewhere on this planet is the easiest person to talk to," she finds herself saying. "But I'm pretty sure he doesn't live in Vicksburg."

"I'm going to go ahead and guess one of the tea-producing countries," says Teddy. "The betel-nut-chewing countries. Sri Lanka, maybe. Or Bangladesh."

"Okay," she says. "Okay Bangladesh."

They've found common ground again, and she's grateful for that, because it means that she can end the conversation. She hangs up the phone, an ancient grey rotary, then crosses the kitchen to the jack and disconnects it.

She exhales slowly, feeling her shoulders go slack, standing motionless and barefoot in the middle of the room. She can hear the fridge buzzing. She feels surprised, as she often has before, by how much the sound soothes her. The buzzing grows fiercer, then settles, like a sleeping dog's breathing. She tries to remember the last time Teddy asked her about her own writing. Her Royal ML 100 Standard Electric is sitting where it always sits, on the ell at the end of the counter, but today there's actually a sheet of paper in it: a bright new sheet of yellow bond legal paper, eight and a half by 14. Legal paper is less intimidating, for some reason, although the opposite ought to be true.

She opens a beer and sits down at the counter.

The novel she'll write if she ever writes again, if she manages to have two thoughts that fit coherently together, will be set in a world of such near-perfect equivalence to ours that it will take the reader half the book to guess that something isn't right. The difference will make itself known in the most subtle of ways, largely through dialogue: slight quirks of the vernacular, as though the characters were speaking English as a second language. The marsh a woman's house looks out on is referred to as "a dampness," her car seems to run without fuel or electricity, and she tells her husband to hurry "because I don't have all the tea in China." The woman in question is called Madrigal, a common name in this alternate universe, and she works four days a week — as Maddy does herself — making cold calls for a collection

ILLUSTRATION BY **MARC BURCKHARDT**

agency out of Vicksburg, Mississippi.

It will be a great universe, Maddy tells herself. It will be the universe we actually deserve: one in which the innate tendency of events is not in the direction of entropy but of order, one in which bodies and relationships and plans and careers tend to not-turn-to-shit. But certain lives must still, on rare occasions, come to grief. Otherwise, no story.

Madrigal adores her job, her warm, supportive marriage and her picturesque commute — but for some time now she's sensed that something's off. Her work is deeply satisfying and her career prospects are rosy and her husband is attentive and obliging, but something is wrong, something grey and indefinable, that seems to radiate outward from the middle of her spine. Life is strangely unconvincing, the way the bewigged and costumed divas always seemed to her when her parents dragged her to the opera as a child. Beautiful but inhuman, inorganic, overacted. This is how Madeleine Wells's protagonist will see the world.

One evening Madrigal is driving home along the dampness in her blue cold-fusion hatchback, admiring the play of sunlight on the water, when a rush of emotion — an almost physical sensation, as if the wind were picking up — compels her to veer from what the navigation system cautions her, with condescending equanimity, to be the shortest distance home. The car comes hoveringly to rest against a wind-tossed bank of cattails. She leans forward, clutching the steering cone in panic, trying to make sense of what is happening to her. How many times, Madrigal asks herself, has she passed this particular bend in the road, this extraordinary, heartbreaking spot with its high bank of thatch? Was it always so excruciatingly scenic, so radiant with hidden meaning? And what has made her stop the car today?

Then, through a break in the cattails, Madrigal sees it.

She has no words for what she's seeing, no adequate points of comparison. She knows only that this is the answer, the key to the riddle, the reason she stopped. It rides low in the water, an oblong grey something, and when it dips its neck beneath the surface it might almost be mistaken for the back of some great snake or eel — but that's wrong again, it's nothing like either, it's simply that she has no frame of reference. A fish or a snake would have scales of some kind, would move quickly, would appear to have weight.

This creature seems weightless. It's covered in what looks to be fabric, perhaps a kind of fur. Something under the water is propelling it forward, smoothly and unhurriedly, but from where she sits she sees no limbs at all. She presses her forehead to the windshield, afraid to roll down the window, afraid to fog the glass by letting out a breath. The creature moves in fussy, aimless circles, indifferent to the idling car, and when its neck and foreparts catch the sun, Madrigal sees that her eyes have misled her: It's dark blue and ivory and rufous and silver. Its seemingly unbroken skin is in fact made up of overlapping segments, too many to count, fitted so precisely together that they appear a continuous whole. The creature does have scales, then — scales that catch and hold and even warp the light. Madrigal wipes at her eyes with her sleeve. She wants to push the door quietly open, to step into the damp brown grass in her bare feet, to wade into that tepid, reeking water.

She's just kicked off her work flats when a second creature glides into view, slighter and more darkly patterned than the first. A feeling close to envy overcomes her. She opens the door, more abruptly than she'd intended, and in that instant the event occurs that marks her.

The larger of the two seems to unfold itself, to clap itself open, to expand upward in some esoteric way. It becomes another form of life entirely, wider and brighter and more intricately shaped. It has arms now, or something resembling arms — grey, finlike appendages that taper off to nothing. Its companion unfolds itself as well, and together they seem to attack the water, to hack at its surface, then suddenly to leave it altogether. At first Madrigal's mind rejects what it is seeing. The water is breaking and heaving and rippling toward her. Never once has she seen this. They take to the air.

That night Madrigal is incapable of explaining to her husband what she has seen. He's used to being perplexed by her, and she's grown accustomed to his lack of understanding, but this is failure of a different magnitude. For once she's not trying to describe some diffuse, abstract emotion, but a tangible, visible, living, breathing creature. Living and breathing and flying.

The pair gave a cry just before they took flight — a choked-sounding warble, nothing at all like music. Madrigal struggles to describe the sound to her husband, does her best to imitate it in the comfort of their den, and although he's attentive and not the least annoyed it's obvious to her that he's baffled. Her husband tells her he's never seen her so frustrated, so angry, and he's absolutely right. She stands in a kind of boxer's stance between him and the TV, blocking his view of the flatscreen, shivering and weeping at the sight of him staring blandly up at her. It takes all her self-control to keep from kicking him in his well-intentioned pancake of a face.

That same night she sits down at her husband's outmoded desktop PC and starts searching. She's always been terrible at using search engines — the first keywords she enters are WATER + NO ARMS + DAMPNESS — but within 15 minutes she's found it. ANIMAL + WATER + LONG NECK + CHESTNUT FRONT + AIRBORNE. The creatures she saw flying were a pair of red-necked grebes.

So rare is this animal in the world she inhabits, and so perfect her exurban ignorance, that Madrigal learns the Linnaean classification of the red-necked grebe, Podiceps rubricollis, before she grasps that it's a kind of bird. The term itself is palely familiar — she remembers, now, a set of illustrations in an old clothbound book of her father's — but the only flying creatures she's encountered in her 37 years (most of them, admittedly, spent avoiding the outdoors) have been gnats. And houseflies, she corrects herself. And yellow jackets. Nothing like those two grey shapes dispensing with the earth.

She spends all night reading, clicking on link after link, progressing from grebe to waterfowl to avifauna to the minutiae of "bird topography," the grouping of feather types on the wing, primaries secondaries coverts scapulars mantle, and outward from there to molt cycles and distribution patterns and the past century's catastrophic cycles of extinction — feeling queasy by then, as if she's been watching pornography — and occasionally letting her forehead come to rest against the screen. Before dawn she happens on the field journals of a continental ornithologist, written sometime during the Second Global War, and on a whim decides that this is where her nightlong search will end. She prints a handful of pages and curls up on the sofa in the kitchen-living-dining module and starts to read.

The ornithologist, whose name is Benedikt Weisshaupt, is midway through an expedition to the Bosavi rainforest of Papua New Guinea in the first entry Madrigal reads. He seems to be in flight from something: from fascism, perhaps, or military service, or some more personal disgrace. He's come to this particular swath of trackless, parasite-infested jungle in search of a heretofore-unidentified species of bowerbird, known in the Bosavi language as "He-Who-Waits," endemic to the slopes of a nearby volcano.

"Does intense longing always lead one to extremes?" Weisshaupt asks at the close of the entry. "Perhaps only behind mosquito netting."

He petitions the Bosavi elders for a guide, a cook and an armed escort of seven men but finds them distinctly unimpressed with the anodized steel axe heads he is offering in exchange. He comes to the conclusion that the Bosavi have never encountered steel and is struggling to make clear to them its advantages over hardwood and stone, when a youth with "a corrupt, knowing smile" informs him that the axe heads on offer can be purchased at the Port Moresby depot for the price of half a bundle of tobacco. Weisshaupt's journal lapses into a racist diatribe at this point, which Madrigal discreetly skips over. She picks the narrative up again at the next entry, which is

made up of only one line: "Once again my propensity for admiring marvellous landscapes (sometimes imaginary) has played a trick on me."

Weisshaupt is moving tortuously up the west face of the mountain now, hacking a path through the jungle with one of the cheap steel axes he bought in Port Moresby and griping about the pandanus trees in his way, the rain-slick clay under his feet, with the one man the elders have seen fit to give him. Iguakallalianakup'a, a.k.a. "Ginger," the grinning youth who caused him so much bother. The forest to every side is riotous with birdsong, all manner of cries and shrieks and gurgles, nearly all of which he can't identify. Ginger's response whenever Weisshaupt asks him, however, is always one of two answers simply "animal" or "He-Who-Waits."

" 'What call was that now, Ginger? And don't say He-Who-Waits. That was no bowerbird.'

" 'Yes, Weisshaupt. That was animal.'

" 'What kind of animal, damn you? Just any kind?'

" 'No, Weisshaupt. Not any kind of animal.'

" 'Well then, what kind was it?'

" 'He-Who-Waits.' "

A vine ejects a "vicious, scalding resin" onto the back of Weisshaupt's neck at this moment, and another torrent of abuse ensues, at the end of which we find him shivering in his tent high on the north rim of the crater, fighting to finish the day's journal entry in spite of a burgeoning fever. He manages, with the aid of a steady stream of profanity, to note down the rough outline of a talk he's just had with Ginger: a conversation which has radically changed his understanding of the boy, of the forest and — most of all — of the song that still surrounds him.

"I had asked Ginger, for the hundredth time, to cease his constant, tuneless whistling, and for the hundredth time he'd grinningly refused. I told him he was competing with the birdsong around us, and he laughed more merrily than he had since we'd set out. I lost my temper yet again, cursing him in my frustration, and he took me gently by the wrist, as one might the smallest child, and explained to me that the instant he stopped whistling, we'd be lost.

" 'What on earth do you mean, Ginger? Are you a blind cave-fish, perhaps? Are you a bat?'

" 'No, Weisshaupt,' he said, suddenly solemn. 'I'm a learner of the country. I'm a drawer of the map.'

" 'I see,' I said archly. 'A cartographer, are you?'

"He asked me to repeat the word, then broke into his maddening smile again. 'Yes, Weisshaupt. Exactly so. I'm a cartographer.'

"It was then, over the next thousand vertical meters of unforgiving terrain, that I began to comprehend. I began, slowly and reluctantly, to grasp the bewildering fact that Bosavi songs are *vocalised mappings of the rainforest*, that they are sung *from a bird's point of view* and that I must understand their melodies as *paths of flight* along forest waterways, to discover where we are, in other words, I have only to lift my feet, and flap my arms, and slowly leave the surface of the earth.

" 'Who is He-Who-Waits, Ginger? Is he a bird at all?'

" 'Yes, Weisshaupt. He is of course a bird. And so are you.' "

Weisshaupt's thoughts are drawn toward home as his delirium mounts, back to the past, to the upheavals he's crossed half the world to escape; to the marches and the rallies and the mounting persecutions, to the faces of family and neighbors, dewy-eyed with devotion to their lumbering, self-justifying, perpetually cornered-seeming leader, affectionately known as the Redeemer — and lastly, with nightmarish inevitability, to the Redeemer himself, embattled but snug in his fortified tower, surrounded by counselors and sycophants he barely seems to see. Ginger is running his marvellously cool fingertips along the ornithologist's receding hairline as he suffers these visions, whistling sweetly. Magic is being practised, of this Weisshaupt is certain. He is with the Redeemer now in his personal suite, the twilit chambers in which he communes with his angels and demons, perceiving the convulsions of history from his perch in the dark, indirectly and imperfectly, shadows cast by the Real on the walls of his cave. There seems to be no boundary between Weisshaupt's consciousness and that of the Redeemer any longer. They are witnessing the world through the same bloodshot, sociopathic pair of eyes.

"Does intense longing always lead one to extremes?"

The Redeemer sits in a state-of-the-art reclining chair in his Versailles Room, feeling brittle-boned and child-sized, harkening to disembodied voices. The radio's oculus pulses and flickers. Independent broadcasting still exists — at least for the moment — and occasionally he finds himself listening to it long after midnight, driven by some exquisite, masochistic yearning that he's helpless to explain. Right now a self-satisfied voice, the voice of a "noted memoirist and critic," is describing him — who else? — in terms of animal husbandry.

I think it's useful to go farther back than the obvious totalitarian models, Jeri, and take a look at advances in selective breeding made during the British Agricultural Revolution.

[laughter] Mr Wells, are you suggesting —

I'm just pointing out that He-Who-Shall-Not-Be-Named's obsession with control of our borders, and with ethnic demographics in general, isn't too different from a 17th century sheep breeder's take on the care of the herd.

[laughter] These are dangerous times, Mr Wells. As a journalist —

Journalist and memoirist.

As a journalist and memoirist, apologies, are you sure you want to be making assertions of this nature on the air?

I'm just drawing a parallel, Jeri. If you take a closer look at statements he's made in the past calendar year, on the record, especially with regard to his own flesh and blood —

The Redeemer stares down at his delicate hands. He begins each day thick-boned and massive, as heroic in scale as that statue of the Italian in the roundabout outside his tower, and crawls into bed at night no bigger than a sparrow. He sees himself as a bird in the wee hours, a flightless bird — a kakapo, perhaps, or a kiwi — with flexible, aerated bones. The self-satisfied voice is still talking, still sneering, still characterising him in the nastiest possible terms.

Listen, Jeri. I'm not crazy enough to come right out and say it. But anyone with two or three functional fingers, you know, and access to a personal computer —

The Redeemer listens for the man's name, his full name, and fixes it in his memory. No sooner has he done so, however, than it begins to drift. An occupational hazard. He writes the name down in blue ink on the back of his hand, over other names, faded but still faintly visible.

The pundits, useful up to a point — if only as stooges, as straw men, as figures of fun — have become a liability. On this point all are in agreement, especially those who pose a threat

themselves. The secretary of the exchequer, for example, with his mincing smile and high, Semitic forehead. Or the minister of war, the one with the unpronounceable name, whose staff has been leaking classified documents faster than a five-year-old can wet the bed. In his heart, the Redeemer prefers the reporters, the hatchet men, the whingers, the hacks — even, on his darkest days, the protesters — if only because they've made their bias clear.

But this one. This smug little squeaker. This one gets under his skin.

The Redeemer's phone has been digging uncomfortably into his paunch for some time and he works it free now, checks for reception, then reads the man's name off the back of his hand. He feels wide awake, lucid-brained in his anger, solid again, person-sized, righteous, as he often does in the wee hours. The squeaker is a nobody, a nonstarter, a Brooklyn-dwelling writer of modest-selling essay collections, parents both living, no children, one sister. All this information is readily available, and the Redeemer, especially in the early-morning hours, is a talented seeker. Theodore Avery Wells, 36 years of age, Guggenheim recipient, unmarried. Sister Madeleine Bethany Wells, 38. Resident in Vicksburg, Mississippi. Seventeen Arbuckle Court.

The sister—the sister is of interest. The Redeemer's pre-dawn instincts rarely fail him. A few more clicks with his well-defined fingers and he has all he needs. The fellowships, the honorary mentions, the master's in creative writing from some quaint New England nunnery. No publication record. Hospitalizations, cause unspecified. The smirking pundit brother. He has all that he requires.

The clock on his flatscreen reads 0345 when he rises from his recliner, distinctly larger than life now, sits down at his PC and starts to write. The first order of business is to send a missive to his 18 million followers, farmers and housewives and roofers and attorneys and debt-collection agents and corrections officers and poets and pastors and dental technicians, who take comfort in his late-night pensamientos. He no longer feels angry, but indignation is what they've come to expect from him, and the squeaker's case will serve as well as any.

Decadent snivelling (alcoholic?) propagandist @WellsTeddy was ungenerous to me on Who-Listens-to-the-Radio-Anymore tonight. Give sister a call, @WellsTeddy. Maybe she'll answer.

The writer sees the post and calls his sister. He wants to make the call, to hear her voice, before the weight of what has happened hits him. It's been a month since their last conversation, possibly more. She's been doing better — she's finally found a regimen that works for her, some intricate combination of exercise and meds and "mindfulness" that depresses him even to think about — but he got a message from their father just that morning, urging him to check in. He's thinking about the tightness in his father's voice when his sister picks up.

"Maddy!"

"Jesus, Teddy. Why does every word out of your mouth have an exclamation point after it?"

He's always been morbidly attuned to his big sister's moods, and today he can tell instantly, after less than a sentence, that she hasn't seen or heard about the post. Her voice has the damp, leaden tone that it's had for the better part of the last decade, but its dullness is a comfort to him now. His mind floods with relief. Then he realizes he has no idea what to say next.

"I came across a quote today that made me think of you."

She the eagle, he the sparrow. No one else in all the world.

A long pause. "Okay."

" 'We spend our lives betting on three-legged horses with beautiful names.' "

"Why?"

"I don't know why, Maddy. I didn't write the damn thing. It's by Bohumil Hrabal, the famous Czech —"

"I know who Bohumil Hrabal is. That's not what I'm asking. I want to know why it made you think of me."

"I thought you might like it," he stammers. "No particular —"

"Am I the three-legged horse, Teddy? Or am I more like the one who made the bet?"

It's going wrong so quickly. He's forgotten how to talk to her, how to wriggle his way through her defences, how to find the hairline fissures in the wall. He used to be able to slip effortlessly into the sibling frequency, to change her mood as easily as he could gauge it. In his desperation he now finds himself falling back into his well-established role: the pampered, entitled, narcissistic author, whinging over half-imagined slights. He does his Hunter Wagoner routine.

"Guess who won a 'genius grant' today. Just take a guess."

He hears, or imagines that he hears, his sister break into a grin. "Shit, Teddy bear. I can't even imagine."

"The poet laureate of Methedrine, Alabama. The hillbilly Hemingway. The mouth-breathing Melville."

She laughs at his Wagoner jokes — she always has. It's a way to make contact, to draw her out by making himself contemptible. A sick exchange, he sometimes thinks, but an exchange just the same. Tonight, as so often before, it seems to do the trick. Then suddenly she's telling him she's stopped her medication.

"I'm sorry, Maddy, I'm sorry, okay? I love you very much. I love you and I'm worried about you. Are you yawning?"

An endless-seeming pause. "I love you too, Teddy."

"It's just, you're not the easiest person to talk to, you know? And I'm not the easiest person."

"Somewhere on this planet is the easiest person to talk to." She sighs. "But I'm pretty sure he doesn't live in Vicksburg."

A surge of love and gratitude runs through him. "I'm going to go ahead and guess one of the tea-producing countries," he finds himself saying. "The betel-nut-chewing countries. Sri Lanka, maybe. Or Bangladesh."

"Okay," she murmurs, and suddenly he's riding with his sister in the back seat of a Volkswagen Passat, five years old, maybe six, staring up at her in hopeless admiration, making a study of her every word and gesture. She the eagle, he the sparrow. No one else in all the world.

"Okay," she says a second time, more clearly. "Bangladesh."

He hears the dull click as she hangs up the phone — the clunky grey rotary she still insists on using — and leans back carefully in his ergonomic chair. He pictures his sister standing mutely in the kitchen, lost in thought, half-listening to the hum of the refrigerator. After a time her eyes regain their focus, coming to rest on the kitchen counter, then — shyly, reluctantly — on the typewriter at its far end. It's usually empty, it's always empty, but he imagines a sheet of paper in it now. The paper is textured, substantial. She takes a beer out of the fridge and opens it. She takes a slow sip. He pictures her crossing the room to the counter, staring into space for a moment, then starting to write. ■

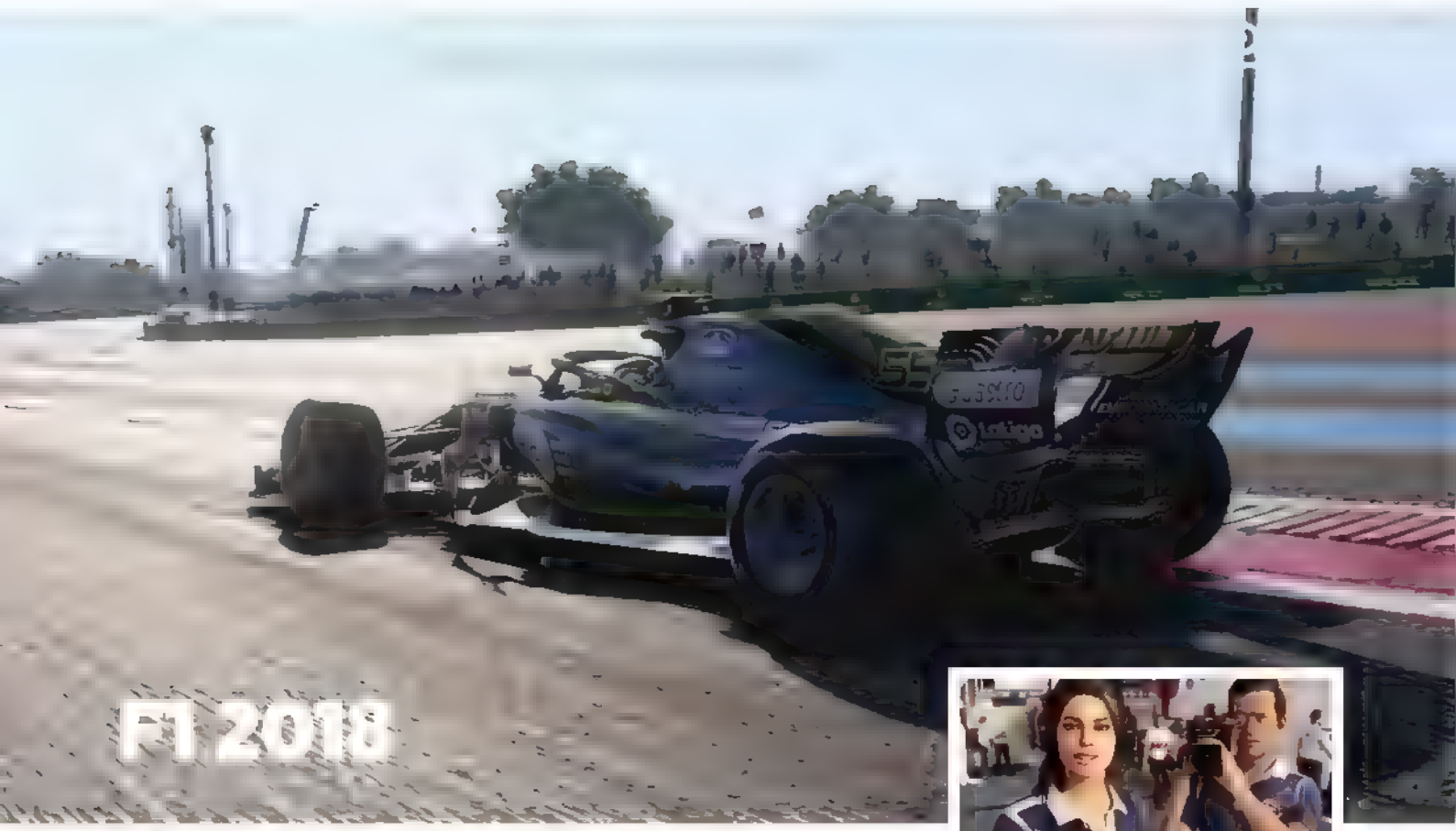
bob
ROMEO & JULIET & RON

MY SPARTAN SENSES ARE TINGLING

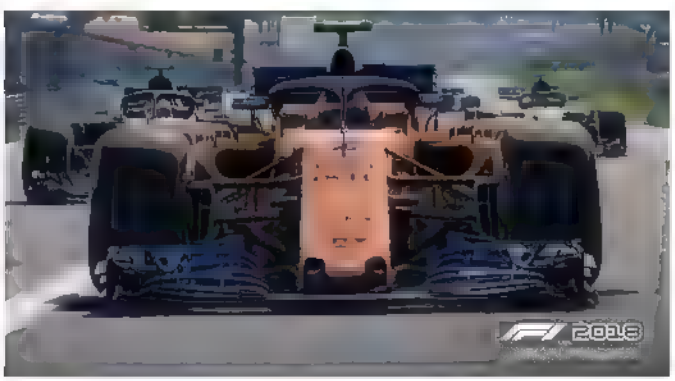
Checking chances, web slinging and Spartan fury is the new path this season

MARVEL'S SPIDER-MAN

Over the last few years, Marvel has dominated the silver screen with their incredibly popular Marvel Cinematic Universe, yet for some odd reason there is yet to be a good Marvel video game. This however is about to change as Marvel and Insomniac Games team up to bring you probably the best superhero game ever. The PS4 exclusive Marvel's Spider-Man is an absolutely incredible game, perfectly capturing the thrills and excitement of being the friendly neighbourhood Spider-Man. Unlike the latest movie, Spider-Man/Peter Parker has 8 years of crime-fighting experience behind him and he is as comfortable with his superpowers as he is in his Spidey tights. A new villain has arrived on the scene and threatens everything Peter Parker holds dear, and as Spider-Man you will require all your skills to survive. Fortunately Insomniac Games has done the impossible, actually making you feel like Spider-Man with improvisational combat, dynamic acrobatics, fluid urban traversal and endless environmental interaction. It's hard to express how good it feels to swing through the wonderfully recreated New York, swinging from building to building, seamlessly entering combat and unleashing your full Spidey fury. Another nice surprise is the addition of playing as Peter Parker, dealing with his day to day life is a welcome change of pace and adds to the overall experience. Overall, this is the ultimate superhero game and sets the bar incredibly high for any future Marvel games.



With the new season of the FIA Formula One World Championships in full swing, the official video game for 2018 aims to improve upon its predecessor in numerous ways. Hailed by critics as the best F1 game ever, F1 2017 was a massive improvement for the franchise and this year's version looks to expand upon an already solid game. As always the teams, drivers and tracks are up to date for the new season, plus all the cars and decals are spot on. Visually it's as gorgeous as ever with each car and track looking more realistic than ever, thanks to an improved lighting system and all-new atmospherics that truly gives the game a sense of scale and grandeur. The authenticity doesn't stop there as F1 2018 will feature a player managed Energy Recovery System for the first time in the franchise history, adding another strategic element to an already ultra-realistic racer. This year will also see the addition of more classic cars, a feature that was highly praised in 2017's version, with the promise of more to be added on through DLC in time. The career mode has also been greatly expanded, promising to immerse players even deeper into the world of Formula One so they may truly experience the daily lives of an F1 driver. Codemasters has become synonymous with great racing titles and once again they live up to that billing, F1 2018 improves on an already solid racing game, offering you the ultimate driving experience.



ASSASSIN'S CREED: ODYSSEY

After the immense success of AC: Origins, both financially and critically, Ubisoft returns with another epic Assassin's Creed adventure this time set during the peak of Greece's Golden Age. Playing as a Spartan-born warrior, you set out to solve the mystery of a legendary broken spear, once wielded by the great Spartan king Leonidas, as you travel all over the beautiful setting of Greece The franchise first sees you choose between two characters at the start, the two siblings Alexios and Kassandra, with each character featuring different missions and unique dialogue options. Another franchise-first is the addition of aforementioned dialogue options, allowing you to interact with others in whatever way you choose, be it aggressive or helpful, each option changing how the scenario will end. It's a surprisingly welcome addition and expertly handled by the Ubisoft team. Gameplay wise Odyssey feels very similar to last year's Origins, with some tweaks made here and there. Your character's fighting style is more aggressive however, with the shield being entirely removed and relying on aggression and parries to defeat your opponents. A major highlight however is the addition of epic clashes between Sparta and Athens, pitting big battles between 300 soldiers during the deadliest conflicts of the time, the Peloponnesian War. Naval combat also makes a welcome return and sailing the seas never felt so good. As per all Ubisoft games, Odyssey looks amazing and Greece feels truly alive as you travel from idyllic beaches to arid deserts to volcanic mountain ranges. Assassin's Creed: Odyssey is another home run for Ubisoft and a must play if you loved last year's Origins.

YILENA HERNANDEZ

Photography by **LADYEPHOTOGRAPHY** *Text by* **NELLY MADUNA**

Tell us something surprising about you?
I'm very unpredictable. I'm very outgoing and I'm not afraid to try new experiences.

Were you excited to shoot for Playboy?
I was super excited. I've dreamed of this opportunity since I started my career. Playboy is a big platform for me, and I believe that it will take me further in my career and expose me to a much bigger challenge that I am eager to conquer.

What inspires you?
My biggest inspiration is my Grandmother "Nina." She is the reason behind my career and what keeps me going harder and harder.

Why did you choose to pursue a career in modelling?
It's bigger than just a dream to me. I chose this career because it puts me in my comfort zone. When I'm modelling, I get excited and super comfortable. I'd say it's one thing I believe I could excel in.

Who do you look up to in the modelling industry?
I look up to Tyra Banks. Her path and mine are a bit similar. She's achieved goals she was told were impossible and would never reach.

What are some of your hobbies?
I love to play dress up. It enhances my designer ability. My main hobby is designing clothes.

Name three things on your bucket list?
My own clothing line, making love in a roller coaster, and travel the whole world.

Turn-ons
Fashion is one of my biggest turn-ons. Someone's smell, or breath could also be another turn-on to me depends on who.

Turn-offs
Negativity I'd say is my biggest turn-off. I stand for I can and will.

Describe to us your perfect date
I had a perfect date before. It was great company and I enjoyed every bit of it. I was in my comfort zone. Having the right pleasure and a relaxed mind at the same time was what meant everything to me overall.

Which world capital would you most like to visit, and why?
I'd really love to visit Dubai. I've seen very amazing stuff about it. It's very editorial and I'd love to do both business and pleasure there.

What is your mantra?
My mantra most of the time is the ocean breeze and fresh air.

WARNING

PLAYBOY INTERVIEW: MICHAEL SHANNON

A candid conversation with the star of screen and stage whose bone deep empathy leads to indelible, Oscar worthy performances but stops at the gates of the White House

You're not likely to find a better example of the real Michael Shannon than the story of how he spent this year's Academy Awards night. Although he wasn't nominated, The Shape of Water — the interspecies romance in which he co-stars as a sadistic government agent — was up for several categories, including best picture. When it took the top prize, Shannon didn't join his director and castmates onstage; instead, he watched it all from the Old Town Ale House, a Chicago fixture where the jukebox never gets turned off and a painting of a naked Sarah Palin with a machine gun hangs on a wall. Shannon was sitting alone at the bar in a puffy jacket, nursing a beer beneath the tiny TV. If any other A-list actor had done this, it would have felt like a bad PR stunt But when Shannon skips the red carpet to slum it at a dive bar, it feels exactly right the perfect expression of his mercurial spirit.

If Shannon has a master plan for his career, it's difficult to pinpoint, then again, the same could be said of his entire life From an early age, he was a natural vagabond: Born in Lexington, Kentucky, he bounced between living with his mother, a social worker in Lexington, and his father, an accounting professor in Chicago. After dropping out of high school, he co-founded A Red Orchid Theatre in Chicago, then broke into movies, first as a bit player in Groundhog Day, before deciding he wanted to do theatre instead. He fled back to Chicago to do plays including Tracy Letts's Bug and Killer Joe, both of which went on to critical acclaim in New York and London, which led to bigger roles in such blockbusters as Pearl Harbor and Bad Boys II, which led to filmmaker Werner Herzog, who has cast Shannon three times to date, calling him "arguably the most important [actor] of his generation."

Shannon manages to appear in at least one prestigious art-house movie every year, two of which Nocturnal Animals and Revolutionary Road have earned him Oscar nominations. But beyond that, his choices are all over the map He has played a lot of bad guys, from an abusive boyfriend in 8 Mile to a contract killer in The Iceman to a corrupt Prohibition agent in the HBO series Boardwalk Empire, but he bristles at any suggestion of typecasting. Whether it's a book-burning zealot in Fahrenheit 451 or a pissed-off sorority girl in a Funny or Die video, he can be simultaneously ferocious and achingly vulnerable.

In his new movie, What They Had, about a woman with Alzheimer's and the family struggling to protect her, Shannon ventures into new territory as the funniest character in an otherwise heart-wrenching drama. When he

'The people I play — whatever reductive term you want to use, villains or whatever — they're all in their own private shit box They're all suffering as much as any other human being on earth "

"Harvey Weinstein grabbed my arm and said, 'I've got my eye on you. You're getting there.' I didn't know what to say, so I was like, 'Thanks, Dad.' He just made me feel gross "

"You don't have to know the answer to every question. That's not how life works We don't necessarily know what the fuck we're doing We're just winging it And that's how life is."

PHOTOGRAPHY BY **DANIELLE LEVITT**

tells his sister, played by Hilary Swank, how their confused mother tried to seduce him. It's a welcome moment of comedic relief. "I just kept calling her Mom," he explains. "Thanks, Mom. It's nice to see you too, Mom. I'm really glad you birthed me, Mom." His character calls his sister "Dingleberry," makes jokes about pants shitting and responds to news that their grandmother drank the holy water in church with "At least she's hydrated."

Playing the laugh lines may seem to be a stretch for the 44-year-old Shannon, who lives in Brooklyn with his wife, actress Kate Arrington, and their two daughters, Sylvie and Marion, but it's business as usual for an actor accustomed to defying expectations. In just the past five years, his roles have ranged from Elvis Presley to Superman's archnemesis.

We sent Contributing Editor **Eric Spitznagel** to meet with Shannon in New York City. He reports: "I've known Shannon since the early 1990s, when he was still a teenager. He acted in a few plays that I co-wrote and directed in Chicago, at a theatre in a crime-ridden neighbourhood where an audience of three was considered a packed house. For this interview, we huddled in the corner of a restaurant in the Gramercy Park Hotel and drank several glasses of wine. Later, we went to the *Late Night With Seth Meyers* studio, where he was a guest, and after the show we drank another bottle of wine in his dressing room while talking jazz and theatre with Common. Shannon is an imposing presence, six three with gangly limbs, a bushy moustache (he grew it for a role, his first authentic facial hair in a movie) and a hardboiled detective's jawline. Regardless of what he's saying, there's an intensity to him; he orders food like he's trying to get a confession out of the waitress, and he has a super-dry sense of humour that's easy to miss if you're not paying attention. But if Shannon has a tendency to stare at you until you think his retinas are going to burn into your brain, it's only because, unlike a lot of actors, he seems more interested in listening than hearing the sound of his own voice.

"Just moments after we found our table, Shannon glanced at the menu and noticed a dish called Charred Suckling Pig Hearts. 'Are you kidding me?' he said. 'I want that. I want that so much.' It was not how I envisioned our interview beginning, but it also seemed weirdly perfect; like, if I randomly walked into a bar and sat down next to Shannon, this is exactly how it would go."

PLAYBOY: Eat a lot of hearts, do you?

SHANNON: Not really. I mean, I don't eat them regularly. I might if they were offered to me. This reminds me, when I was in *'Tis Pity She's a Whore*, back in 1997 I think it was, there was a scene where I'd carve my sister's heart out of her chest. We needed a heart, so I went down to the meatpacking district in Chicago, I got this cow heart and brought it to the theatre, and we covered it in fake blood and used it in the show.

PLAYBOY: Just one cow heart?

SHANNON: We could make a heart last for a few weeks. You don't want to keep it too long because then you're playing with fire. In this play, I was kissing the thing.

PLAYBOY: You kissed the heart?

SHANNON: Yeah. [pauses] With lots of tongue.

PLAYBOY: Here's the thing that almost never gets mentioned about you in the media. You're a funny guy.

SHANNON: I guess so. I think I have the capacity to make some people laugh.

PLAYBOY: Do you approach comedy and drama differently?

SHANNON: I approach everything differently. I don't have a system. I have my consciousness, my attention and I guess whatever muscle memory I've worked up over the years. I find categorization mundane. Who cares whether something is a drama or a comedy? Laughter leads to tears anyway, and tears lead to laughter. Everything in life is a circle.

PLAYBOY: When was the last time you had an uncontrollable giggle fit?

SHANNON: If I'm onstage and someone is really struggling with their lines, that makes me giggle. I have to bite my lip. Usually when things go wrong or fall apart, I find that funny.

PLAYBOY: You like the chaos?

SHANNON: I do, yeah. I'm incredibly amused by that movie The Room. An old friend of mine said that when I watched it for the first time, it was the hardest he's ever seen me laugh. I like watching things not work.

PLAYBOY: Do you want to do more comedy?

SHANNON: Sure. I don't know what that is. What would you classify as "more comedy"?

PLAYBOY: Comedy films.

SHANNON: Where the point is to make people laugh?

PLAYBOY: Yeah.

SHANNON: Your question is more organized than how I think about my career, or anything in my life, really. I don't know what I'll do in the future. I don't know what's going to happen. It's not interesting to say, "Yes, I will do more comedy." What's interesting is to say, "I have no fucking idea what's going to happen next."

PLAYBOY: That takes bravery.

SHANNON: It does?

PLAYBOY: Sure it does. Most people want to know where they're heading. They want to prepare for their future, feel like they're in control.

SHANNON: I wish I could claim I felt courageous, but at this point it's the only way I'm capable of existing.

PLAYBOY: Do you ever feel scared when you show up on a movie set?

SHANNON: All the time, particularly on the first day. It's like the first day of school times a hundred.

PLAYBOY: Even though you've probably done it all before?

SHANNON: That doesn't make it easier.

PLAYBOY: What about shooting a sex scene? Does that get less terrifying the more you do it?

SHANNON: You never get used to sex scenes. Sex scenes are absurd, but in some ways they're just like real sex. They have all the fear, anxiety, sadness and loneliness -- but with none of the pleasure.

PLAYBOY: Your first sex scene was with Kim Basinger in 8 Mile, right?

SHANNON: That was like skydiving. It was jumping out of a plane. But she was very nice to me, very kind.

PLAYBOY: How so?

SHANNON: She just had this look in her eyes. Everything about her was calm and reassuring. She was like, "It's going to be okay. It's fine. Don't worry about anything."

PLAYBOY: Was she picking up on your anxiety?

SHANNON: I don't know. Maybe. I was a child back then. Well, no, I don't want to make it sound like paedophilia or something.

PLAYBOY: You were 28 when that movie came out.

SHANNON: But in terms of life experience, I was out of my depth.

PLAYBOY: You did a sex scene with James Franco in 2011's The Broken Tower, and according to Franco it made you "uncomfortable."

SHANNON: Is that what he said? I was only uncomfortable because right before we shot it, James was eating a giant slice of pizza. He had tomato sauce all over his face, and his breath smelled like garlic. He was explaining how the sex scene was going to go, and I was like, "Could you not be eating pizza right now? Could you put that down, please?"

PLAYBOY: That's not sexy.

SHANNON: That's not sexy at all. We were shooting it over a pizzeria, so I understood. I'm sure he was hungry. I get it. But my main discomfort in that moment wasn't the sex, it was the tomato sauce on his face.

PLAYBOY: You did another film with Franco, and he asked you to fuck a corpse.

SHANNON: That was our first film together. It was a short called Herbert White. I only agreed to do that because well, it's kind of a surreal story. I was in Boston, doing press for a movie and visiting my sister, and when I was waiting at the station for a train back to New York, I noticed this really weird-looking cat in a trench coat looking at me. He's in a ball cap and big sunglasses and he's got a big, bushy beard. From a distance he looked like a homeless person. He started walking toward me, and I'm thinking, Who the fuck is this guy? Then he gets right up in front of me and is like, "Hi, Mike. I'm James Franco." In my head, I'm like, What's happening right now? He says to me, "I've written a screenplay based on one of my favourite poems. It's a short film, and I'd like you to star in it. It's really dark and twisted. Would you consider doing that?"

PLAYBOY: Why was he so dishevelled?

SHANNON: He was in Boston to get the Hasty Pudding award at Harvard or something. He was incognito. If I were him, I'd probably be incognito too. I think it was a real beard. [pauses] I think. I didn't tug at it or anything.

PLAYBOY: You're very loyal to directors. You've repeatedly appeared in films by Werner Herzog, Jeff Nichols and Franco. Why do you keep coming back to them? Do they just have the best scripts?

SHANNON: It's not just the story. For me, it always come down to, Do I want to work with this person? I mean, if the script is absolute garbage, I won't do it. But if I like the director and think they're smart and have something interesting to say, that's more likely to convince me than anything else.

PLAYBOY: Do you feel the same directors are less likely to typecast you? Can they be counted on to challenge you rather than pigeonhole you in predictable villain roles?

SHANNON: I never thought of it that way. The whole typecasting thing has been imposed on my psyche, but it's never been a concern of mine. I'm aware of it only because other people bring it up. To me, it reeks of laziness, people not paying attention to what I'm doing. I think if you're really paying attention, you'll see what I'm talking about. Most people barely pay attention to anything. As an actor, you have to grab them by the lapels to make them sit up and notice you. And people who are good at doing that tend to get rewarded for it, unfortunately. I'm not going to play it that way.

I can't help it. I have empathy for other people. That's how I make a living.

PLAYBOY: Do you have a lot of interaction with fans? Do they walk up to you and say hello?

SHANNON: Sometimes. The one question I get a lot, which I find bewildering, is "You're the actor, right? You're the actor!" Yes, I am the actor. I do it all. Everything you watch, that's me.

PLAYBOY: Do they have strong opinions about your characters — who they like, who they don't?

SHANNON: I used to get that a lot during Boardwalk Empire. People would come over and say, "You're so great as Van Alden. I hate him so much!"

PLAYBOY: Did that bother you?

SHANNON: It irritated me a little. I feel if you hate Van Alden, you aren't getting the whole picture. Van Alden wasn't a bad person, and nobody suffered more than he did. He tried, man; he tried. He was kind of like Job. Life kept throwing him curveballs. He couldn't handle it.

PLAYBOY: When you spend enough time in a character's skin, do you start to empathise with him?

SHANNON: Oh yeah, all the time. When I played Captain Beatty in Fahrenheit 451, about halfway through shooting I was like, "Maybe he's right. Maybe people do know too much. Maybe people are better off not knowing anything." I certainly see a lot of evidence of that in the empirical world. People are so overwhelmed and burdened with "knowledge" that they have absolutely no idea what to do with or about it. So maybe he's got a point. Maybe ignorance is bliss.

PLAYBOY: But Beatty doesn't seem that happy.

SHANNON: Sure. He's in his own private hell. That's the thing about all these people. The people I play — whatever reductive term you want to use, villains or whatever — they're all in their own private shit box. They're all suffering as much as any other human being on earth. Beatty is in agony. The only way he can function is to hold on to his worldview with white knuckles. It's the only thing he has. He has no home, no family, nothing except his job and the voices in his head.

PLAYBOY: Does playing all these bad men and learning to see the world through their eyes make you more empathetic with bad men in the real world?

SHANNON: I was talking to somebody today, and Harvey fucking Weinstein came up. I said something that, I don't know, I'm starting to regret.

PLAYBOY: You weren't defending him?

SHANNON: No! I think Harvey Weinstein is a terrible human being. I could never stand the guy. When I got in close proximity to him, I just didn't feel good. He did not inspire good feelings in other people. I remember the first time I met him, at Chateau Marmont. I was there having dinner, and as I walked past his table, he grabbed my arm and said, "I've got my eye on you."

PLAYBOY: Yikes.

SHANNON: And then he said, "You're getting there." I didn't know what to say, so I was like, "Thanks, Dad." He just made me feel gross.

PLAYBOY: Didn't you make a movie for Weinstein that's stuck in limbo now?

SHANNON: The Current War. He produced it, and we're trying to sell it to somebody else, have another studio put it out. But the Weinstein Company won't let go of it, and now it's all tangled up in this legal bullshit. Probably nobody is ever going to fucking see the damn thing, and that makes me really sad. It's a beautiful, relevant story, and I want people to see it. On one hand, I'm angry that this movie I love is probably going to disappear because of what this monster did. But on the other hand, after everything that happened...I feel sorry for him.

PLAYBOY: You feel sorry for Harvey Weinstein?

SHANNON: Listen, I know he's terrible. He did a bunch of terrible shit. But the guy's life is fucking over, man. He's probably shattered, you know? Now I'm just waiting for the headline: mike shannon is a harvey wemstein sympathiser

PLAYBOY: No, I get it. You're not saying he's innocent, or even a good person. You're just saying, as a human being, he must feel empty and alone.

SHANNON: I don't know how he gets out of bed in the morning. Why does he bother? If I was him, I would just walk in front of a bus and end it. What's he got to look forward to?

PLAYBOY: I'm sure they all feel that way. Kevin Spacey must be feeling pretty miserable right now.

SHANNON: I didn't know Kevin very well. Some people think we're friends, but we worked together for only five days on Elvis & Nixon. I'm sure he's suffering, and I'm not sure if anyone's reaching out to him. Those guys, Kevin and Harvey and all the rest of them who've been accused, they're like untouchables now. They may deserve it; they may not deserve it. I don't know. But I wonder what's going on in their heads.

PLAYBOY: It's not all that different from how you approach your characters.

SHANNON: Yeah. I can't help it. A lot of what I do is empathy. That's what I do. I have empathy for other people. That's how I make a living. I try to see things from other people's points of view.

PLAYBOY: Does it make you more aware or sensitive to human suffering? Can you look across a crowded restaurant and say, "Oh yeah, that person over there, they're in pain"?

SHANNON: I don't know if I'm super clairvoyant that way. [scans the room] All these people seem so much happier than I am. Why is that?

PLAYBOY: That might change if they suddenly noticed a creepy guy with a moustache staring at them from across the room.

SHANNON: As he eats charred pig hearts. [pops another heart into his mouth]

PLAYBOY: Do you think the world's in trouble?

SHANNON: There are a lot of things happening right now that I find deeply unsettling and upsetting. I'm primarily worried about what's happening with the EPA. I think the environmental issues are paramount. If you can't breathe, who gives a shit about anything else? And then the thing that kills me is they get philanthropic with the money. They make all this money destroying shit, and then they give it away. The Koch ballet theatre at Lincoln Center in New York is named after one of the Koch brothers.

PLAYBOY: Didn't you meet a Koch brother once?

SHANNON: Yeah. It was at the Great Gatsby premiere in New York. I think it was the more docile of the two. Someone introduced us, and he kind of looked frightened, actually. He looked like a deer in headlights. He was surrounded by artists. I didn't know enough at the time to punch him in his face, but I knew enough to be slightly horrified that we had shaken hands.

PLAYBOY: If you could go back and do it again, would you say something to him or actually punch him in the face?

SHANNON: What could I say? The thing is, he knows how terrible he is. If I said, "You know, what you're doing is not very nice," it's not like he would say, "Really? I didn't know that! This is such a surprise. If somebody would've told me, I would've stopped." He knows. They all know what they're doing.

PLAYBOY: You predicted that Trump was going to win long before it happened.

SHANNON: I did?

PLAYBOY: In an interview for the Chicago Tribune in September 2015, you said, "He's going to win the election."

How is Trump suffering? He's having a blast! Are you fucking kidding me?

SHANNON: Well, sure. It had to happen. And here's the thing: I think it would've been a disaster either way. If Hillary had won, the shit would've hit the fan in a totally different way. There might have been a civil war or something crazy.

PLAYBOY: You really think that?

SHANNON: Well, they've got all the guns, apparently. For some of these people, the feeling about Hillary was kind of "Over my dead body." Well, now they've got their dream president, and they can see how that's worked out for us. A lot of them are still sticking to their guns, saying he's doing a good job. It's mystifying to me.

PLAYBOY: Do you think their minds can be changed?

SHANNON: Somebody who thinks Trump is doing a good job, there's no conversation to have with that person. I know they say you should reach across the aisle and all that crap, but to me it feels like putting your hand into a fan.

PLAYBOY: If or when they make a movie about the Trump presidency, who would you want to play?

SHANNON: Obviously I would be John Bolton, because of my moustache. No, I don't know. I honestly don't think I'd want to be in a movie about this administration. I wouldn't want anyone to make a movie about it. My preference would be that it just fade into nonexistence. I wouldn't want to memorialise it or celebrate it in any way.

PLAYBOY: Even if the film were critical?

SHANNON: It wouldn't matter. People feel the way they feel about Trump and his co conspirators. It's like what I said about the Koch brothers: People know what's happening, and they feel one way or the other about it, and nothing you do is going to change that.

PLAYBOY: There's no part of you that would want to play Donald Trump?

SHANNON: No.

PLAYBOY: Just to get inside his head? You talked about being fascinated with bad men who are suffering.

SHANNON: How do you mean? How is he suffering?

PLAYBOY: You don't think Trump struggles with demons?

SHANNON: He's having a blast! Are you fucking kidding me? That guy is having so much fun.

PLAYBOY: And there's no self-doubt or fear?

SHANNON: He's having the time of his fucking life. He doesn't even have to work. All the hard work that most people have to do to get to be president of the United States, he just skipped all that. The fucking guy doesn't even know what's in the Constitution. He doesn't have any grasp of history or politics or law or anything. He's just blindfolded, throwing darts at the side of a bus.

PLAYBOY: So Trump is where your capacity for empathy ends?

SHANNON: What is there to be empathetic toward?

PLAYBOY: What do you think is going through his head at four a.m. as he's lying in bed and staring at the ceiling?

SHANNON: He's probably thinking, I want some fucking pussy. I don't know. I'm not going to remotely contemplate the notion that Trump is capable of deep reflection.

PLAYBOY: In any form?

SHANNON: In any form! It doesn't happen. Fuck that guy. When he's alone with his thoughts, he's not capable of anything more complex than "I want some pussy and a cheeseburger. Maybe my wife will blow me if I tell her she's pretty."

PLAYBOY: You really don't think if you made a movie about Trump, as you perceive him to be, that it would make any difference?

SHANNON: Probably not, no. People believe what they believe. I do believe in the arts' capacity to make people think. I believe that happens. Not all the time but most of the time.

PLAYBOY: What was the last movie that changed you or made you think about something in unexpected ways?

SHANNON: For an actor this is going to sound terrible, but a lot of times it's documentaries that do that to me.

PLAYBOY: Why is that?

SHANNON: The truth is much more interesting than fiction. When I'm in a movie about actual events, there's a terrible process where people take something that's intrinsically interesting and don't have enough faith in it to just leave it alone. So they mess with it, thinking they're making it more compelling, which inevitably doesn't happen. But in documentaries that's never going to happen. You have the real story, and you either care or you don't.

PLAYBOY: Do you go back and watch any of your movies, studying your plays like a quarterback?

SHANNON: No. I approach it the way I think Bob Dylan does. The past is the past, you know? He doesn't sit around listening to Blonde on Blonde. He could listen to it and think, Man, I did this, that thin, wild mercury sound is just so cool. But he doesn't. The tricky thing about acting is that the longer you do it, the more difficult it gets.

PLAYBOY: And yet you've spawned your own verb, Shannoning.

SHANNON: That has absolutely nothing to do with me. I did not originate that term. I don't even necessarily agree with it.

PLAYBOY: It came from Octavia Spencer, who acted with you in The Shape of Water. According to her, you had a reputation for nailing a scene in one take.

SHANNON: I don't know if that's true.

PLAYBOY: It was true enough for her that she created the word Shannoning to describe getting something so right the first time that you don't need to do it again.

SHANNON: But I never want to do just one take. I always want to do more. I guess sometimes what I do on the first take is plenty sufficient.

PLAYBOY: It seems like you tend to avoid overanalyzing or over-rehearsing a scene. You just want to do it and see what happens.

SHANNON: That is true. I do have a loathing for that kind of navel-gazing. I think a lot of times people are stalling when they do that. They're trying to make it less scary or something. But to me, it kills the moment. You don't have to know the answer to every question. That's not how life works. You and me sitting here, we're talking, and we don't necessarily know what the fuck we're doing. We're just winging it. And that's how life is.

PLAYBOY: And it's how you want acting to be?

SHANNON: Everyone wants it to be "This line means this and this moment means this." I'm comfortable not knowing what things mean. I don't feel that's my job, to know what things mean.

PLAYBOY: In terms of the story or the character you're playing?

SHANNON: All of it. Certainly the story. People always ask me, "What do you hope audiences will take away from this?" I don't mean to be rude, but are you really asking me that question? If I answer that, why would they need to watch the thing in the first place? They could just get my answer. For me, it's more experiential. It's about having an experience and realizing you have limited control over what that experience becomes.

PLAYBOY: You want that in your career and your life?

SHANNON: It's certainly the way I've lived my life. If I had some sort of plan, I wouldn't be here right now.

PLAYBOY: When you were 15, did you have any thoughts about your future?

SHANNON: At 15 I was living moment to moment. I wouldn't even have been interested in discussing my future. I knew I loved acting. When I started acting in Chicago, I loved it so much. You know; you were there. I would do anything. Anything, anywhere.

I do believe in the arts' capacity to make people think, most of the time.

PLAYBOY: Nobody was more committed than you.

SHANNON: But I wasn't thinking that maybe one day this will lead to something. I was fortunate; I got some help from my dad when I really needed it. I had a safety net, which gave me the opportunity to have that attitude.

PLAYBOY: He gave you financial help?

SHANNON: There were times when, if I was really crashing and burning, he would bail me out. Which he could do, because he was a professor and they do all right.

PLAYBOY: There were rumours that when you started out you were sleeping in the park.

SHANNON: That paints a picture I'm not entirely comfortable with. I know Tracy Letts gets mad when I say that, because he's the one who put it out there. If and when that happened, it was very sporadic. I was not someone who needed to be worried about.

PLAYBOY: Did a part of you know it would all work out?

SHANNON: I didn't know anything. I was ambitious but only to an extent. I didn't move out to L.A. and put my headshot on everyone's windshield. I had no interest in leaving Chicago. People would move to L.A. or New York, and I thought they were crazy. I was having so much fun in Chicago. I knew if you moved to New York or L.A., scary things happened, like nobody hired you or you had to work some terrible day job.

PLAYBOY: That doesn't happen in Chicago?

SHANNON: Well, okay, people had to work terrible day jobs in Chicago, but at least on the weekends you could go act in a play and tell a story and feel like you were exercising that part of yourself. I'll never forget when I went to L.A. once and saw these four actors I had tremendous respect for in Chicago, and they were all delivering pizzas. They were all in a parking lot, playing hacky sack and waiting for pizza delivery orders. I thought, This just isn't right.

PLAYBOY: You got into acting because you didn't want to play sports, right?

SHANNON: I was not an athlete, and I wanted something to do after school. I was living with my mom, down in Kentucky. They had a bulletin board at school with various activities, and one of them was speech team. That's how the whole thing started.

PLAYBOY: You did a monologue about boogers.

SHANNON: It's called "Booger Days," from Lake Wobegon Days by Garrison Keillor.

PLAYBOY: Did you know right away, "This is what I should be doing with my life"?

SHANNON: No. It wasn't like some woozy fever dream. It was just, This is kind of interesting. Some people know as soon as they're old enough to be conscious of themselves that they want to be actors. I had other thoughts about what I might end up doing.

PLAYBOY: Like what?

SHANNON: I thought architecture was interesting. And I always loved music. I played bass in the orchestra.

PLAYBOY: You still play in a band, right? Corporal.

SHANNON: Yeah, but it's hard to make a living from music. There are people who have devoted their whole lives to making music who don't make any money.

PLAYBOY: You skipped the Golden Globes ceremony earlier this year to sing Iggy Pop songs for a David Bowie tribute in Chicago. That sure sounds like a guy who'd rather be rocking than hanging out with actors.

SHANNON: I did five songs as my feeble

version of Iggy Pop, and when I came off the stage I felt like I was going to die. The real Iggy Pop does this for two hours a night on tour.

PLAYBOY: And he's in his 70s.

SHANNON: Right! I can't do that. My friend Matt Walker, who was drumming with us that night, told me a story about Iggy. Matt is Morrissey's drummer and goes on tour with him. Morrissey did a co-headlining thing with Iggy Pop at some sort of music festival, and Matt was watching from the wings. Iggy killed it, as he always does, because he's Iggy fucking Pop. After the show, these two guys had Iggy's arms around their shoulders and were dragging him back to the green room. Iggy was just depleted. He had nothing left.

PLAYBOY: Have you ever felt like that, utterly depleted, after an acting performance?

SHANNON: When I do theatre. Doing eight shows a week is an adjustment. In Chicago we were lucky to get two shows a week. But when I came to New York and started doing Killer Joe and Bug, that was eight shows a week, two on Saturday and two on Sunday. Between the Sunday matinee and the night show, I was usually like, "Please Lord, I can't do this anymore. I can't." I'd be on the floor in the fetal position, listening to Radiohead, losing my mind.

PLAYBOY: Doing a film isn't as exhausting?

SHANNON: People have a tendency to overreact in this business. They act like coming to a set and sitting around a trailer all day is hard work. It can be tedious sometimes, but it's not torture. Compared to, like, a Syrian refugee, our life is not that brutal. Actors can be babies.

PLAYBOY: Your parents sent you to therapy as a kid.

SHANNON: My dad did, yeah. But that was unrelated to acting in any way, shape or form.

PLAYBOY: What was it related to?

SHANNON: I had been jostled about a fair amount in my childhood, back and forth. I was feeling a little discombobulated. It wasn't like I was hearing voices or anything.

PLAYBOY: But you did apparently trash your therapist's office once.

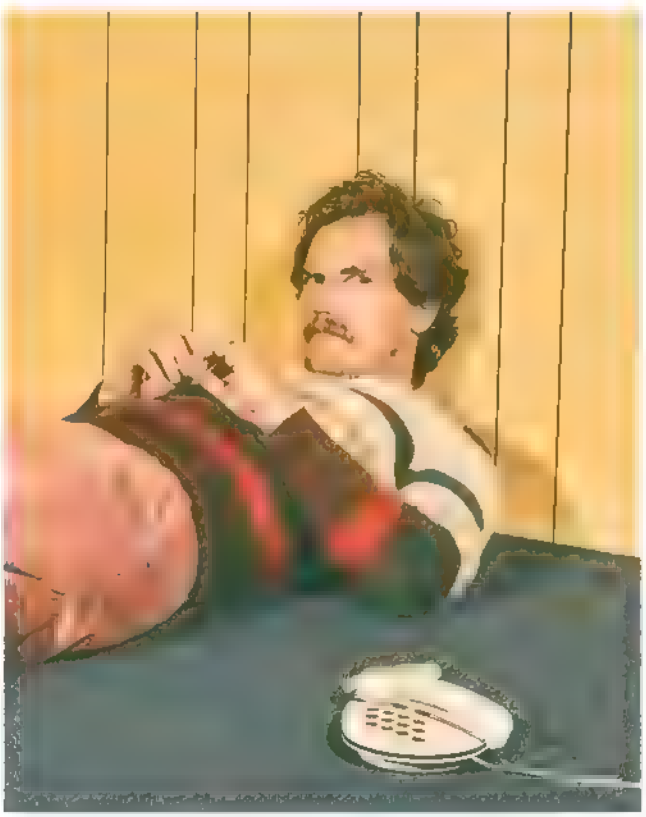
SHANNON: Well, yeah, but I don't think that's the makings of any thrilling saga. There are children doing that as we speak. There are children being unruly and unwieldy and expressing themselves in outlandish ways all over the city of New York at this exact moment.

PLAYBOY: Have you ever tapped into that adolescent anger in one of your roles?

SHANNON: Not really, no. It was such a long time ago. I'm nothing like that anymore. I'm a totally different person.

PLAYBOY: I don't mean for you. I mean if you're playing a character with a lot of anger, do you draw on memories of your own anger as a teen?

SHANNON: Never. I rely on my consciousness, and my consciousness is composed of all my life experiences. I'm sure something akin to what you're describing takes place, but do I sit down and say, "Oh, this scene in What They Had is like the time I got fired from Homer's Ice Cream for throwing a pickle at a customer"? No, I don't do that.



PLAYBOY: So when it's over, you just clock out like it's any other job?

SHANNON: It's not about emotions for me — at least not anymore. Maybe in the beginning, when I was a kid, it was more of that. "I'm going to express my emotions all over the place! All over you!" It's really not about that anymore for me. Now it's just about asking, What's the story? What is this about? What does it mean? What could it mean potentially?

PLAYBOY: That sounds so cold and analytical.

SHANNON: It's much more analytical. I don't think acting is ultimately a good way to deal with your own emotions.

PLAYBOY: There's a scene in What They Had where your character is crying over the death of his father.

SHANNON: Well, okay, okay.

PLAYBOY: Your own dad passed away, so I thought maybe—

SHANNON: Fine, yes, that's one rare instance when I do bring myself into it. Of course you want to think about the people you love who you've lost if you're portraying that on camera. But when it's over, when the director says "Cut," I get up and go get a cup of coffee. I don't stay there on the sidewalk, wailing and rolling around on my back. I think about it enough to tell that particular beat, to accomplish that scene, and then when it's over I get up and walk away.

PLAYBOY: Is acting satisfying to you?

SHANNON: Most days it can be. And some days when you're working it's just, "I want to go home. I want to get the fuck out of here." But that's like anybody. [pauses] I remember one time I was doing a play at the Public Theater in New York, The Little Flower of East Orange, and Philip Seymour Hoffman was directing. The main prop in the play was a hospital bed, because my character's mother, who was played by Ellen Burstyn, was in the hospital. We had this bed in the rehearsal room. One day we took a lunch break and everybody split, but I didn't typically go anywhere for lunch, I'd just look at my script out in the hallway. So I'm out there, and I walk back into the rehearsal hall, and Phil is there all by himself. He's just lying on the hospital bed in the middle of the room, staring at the ceiling. I walk up to him and I'm like, "Are you okay?" He just kind of blinks. And finally he says, "You know, Shannon, one day you're going to know what I'm feeling right now."

PLAYBOY: What did you say?

SHANNON: I didn't know what to say, but in my head I was like, Shit. Then he says to me, "Sometimes I wish I could change my name and just drive away and go work in a gas station somewhere, where nobody knows who I am. Just disappear."

PLAYBOY: Why do you think he needed that?

SHANNON: You get to a certain point, like he did, and everybody wants something from you. People loved Phil. Everyone was like, "Phil, Phil, Phil, we need Phil!" I think he just felt overwhelmed. When he told me about wanting to disappear, I imagine he'd probably just gotten off the phone with his agent and there were like 10 offers pending. "Have you read this script? What do you think about that? I really think you should do this." Meanwhile

he's trying to direct this play his friend wrote. You can't even have the experience you're having right now because somebody is constantly asking what you want to do a month from now.

PLAYBOY: Do you feel the same way?

SHANNON: People ask me, "Don't you ever say no?" Yeah, I say no all the fucking time. If I wanted, every minute of my life could be accounted for. My next three years could be totally booked up. And then you're just crossing shit off a list. It sounds obnoxious to complain about that, because isn't it the dream? But some days you just want to have a cup of coffee and go for a walk. You don't want to go to the set and do the scene where the thing blows up or your dad dies or whatever. You just want to hang out. [pauses and stares out window] It's certainly not the way it used to be. I've had a lot of really good, worthwhile experiences. But you get tired. I don't know how long I can keep doing it.

PLAYBOY: What do you do when you get tired?

SHANNON: I try to take breaks. There were a couple of years when it kind of got out of control. I was going from one thing to the next. But it's not so bad now. The work is demanding, but the part where you're not working is demanding too. The part where you're just a dad and you're taking the kids to school and doing the dishes and washing the laundry and cleaning the litter box and taking out the garbage. They're both demanding. They're demanding in different ways, but they're both demanding. I still get rejuvenated by being at home.

PLAYBOY: Would you ever quit acting?

SHANNON: I don't know. It scares me because it's my job, and I have responsibilities. If I quit, I'm not exactly sure how I would make a living. Sometimes I think we should just stop making movies altogether. Not only me, the whole industry.

PLAYBOY: Stop making movies entirely?

SHANNON: I think we'd all be better off. It's distracting us from stuff we really need to be dealing with. No matter what kind of movie you make, it's ultimately an escape. That's what movies are: an escape.

PLAYBOY: People would still be staring at their phones.

SHANNON: Yeah, that's true. I don't know what to do about that.

PLAYBOY: You're not on Twitter, Facebook, any of it.

SHANNON: I don't do social media. I wish I could say it's hard for me to restrain myself, but it's not. I don't understand people's fascination with it. I wish I could claim it was some sort of heroic gesture on my part, but I'm simply not interested. Who fucking cares?

PLAYBOY: I notice you've upgraded from your usual flip phone.

SHANNON: I literally couldn't get a flip phone. My provider wouldn't give me one, so I had to get this. [picks his iPhone up off the table like it's a turd] But honestly, it doesn't fucking matter. I use it the same way I use the flip phone. If I need to make a call or text somebody, I do that. But I don't get internet on this. I don't have wi-fi. I can't get e-mails. I don't have games. Until I met Kate, I didn't have a cell phone. It used to be if you wanted to get hold of me, you had to call Red Orchid. When my girlfriend before Kate and I broke up, she left this nasty message on the answering machine at Red Orchid about my stinky feet. That was a little embarrassing.

PLAYBOY: Were your feet the reason the relationship didn't work?

SHANNON: No, she was just mad at me. I'd broken up with her. It was fated to end, let's put it that way. Ultimately she was angry and had to get in one more dig at me. My point is, when Kate and I started seeing each other, she asked me if I would get a cell phone, and I did. And that was that.

Sometimes I think we should just stop making movies altogether.

PLAYBOY: You've been with Kate since 2006.

SHANNON: It's the longest relationship I've had in my life.

PLAYBOY: Did you think you'd make it this long?

SHANNON: It's not anything I'd ever envisioned for myself, but here it is.

PLAYBOY: You didn't grow up with good marriage role models. Both of your parents got married five times.

SHANNON: I don't think there's any guarantee, just because your folks stayed married for 70 years, that you're going to know what the fuck to do with another human being. You're not them, and they're not you. You don't have to be like your parents. It's such an arbitrary thing, how and why relationships work. You could get all the lessons you want, but that doesn't mean you won't fuck it up somehow. I guess I learned a little of what not to do. My mom married people and tried to fix them. That's never a good idea. My dad figured it out on his last go-around. He was with his last wife until he passed away, and she's still very much a part of my life. She's a sweet woman. She's coming to New York this weekend to watch the kids.

PLAYBOY: Other than getting a cell phone, did you change at all for Kate?

SHANNON: I've had to change a little bit here and there. [pauses] I bought a house. That was a big change for me.

PLAYBOY: You didn't want to own property?

SHANNON: We have a place in Chicago, but buying in Red Hook was something we just avoided. It was mostly on me.

PLAYBOY: What made you change your mind?

SHANNON: We would look at houses from time to time because my wife really wanted to get a house. We'd go on these spurts of looking at 10 or 15 different houses, and I'd be like, "I don't want to get any of these." They would go away, a year would go by, and then she'd get obsessed again. I'd be like, "Nope, I don't like any of these." I just thought I could keep her at bay indefinitely.

PLAYBOY: What didn't you like about the houses?

SHANNON: I don't know. It was just a feeling. When I walked into them, I was always like, "This isn't my house. Someone else lives here."

PLAYBOY: You know the other people move out when you buy it, right?

SHANNON: It just feels weird. It gives me the heebie-jeebies.

PLAYBOY: What made you feel okay with the house you eventually bought?

SHANNON: I don't know. I walked in and just immediately felt, Oh, okay, I could live here.

PLAYBOY: How did you become a parent?

SHANNON: Are you honestly asking me that question? Come on, we all know how it works. This is Playboy, for Christ's sake.

PLAYBOY: I don't mean the fun part. How did you make the decision? Was it like getting a house? You avoid and avoid and avoid, and one day it inexplicably feels okay to make that leap.

SHANNON: It was not... How do I talk about this? We weren't... It just... We rolled with the punches, let's put it like that.

PLAYBOY: Ah. There were no "Are we ready?" conversations?

SHANNON: No.

PLAYBOY: So you Shannoned it?

SHANNON: [Laughs] I guess I did.

PLAYBOY: If there's a common thread running through your life and career, it sounds like your philosophy is "Let's not plan for anything, we'll just figure it out as we go."

SHANNON: That's it, man. You hit the nail on the head. People ask me what my five-year plan is, what projects I want to do. I don't think that way. It's how I've always been. It's the way I'm capable of coping with existence — with the fact that I'm alive. ■

Laura LYDALL

Photography by **BRIAN B HAYES**
MUA **NICOLE VITALE** *Hair by* **COURTNEY LEIGH**
Location **PALMS CASINO RESORT, LAS VEGAS** *Text by* **NELLY MADUNA**

Describe yourself in three words.
Fun, posit ve, and friendly

Were you excited to shoot for Playboy?
Oh boy! Shooting for Playboy for my first cover was a dream come true and this second one is living the dream I'm really excited

What was it like starting out as a model?
My plans of becoming a cover model fell in to the right place at the right time. I used a l the opportunities I was given and was very fortunate to attend some amazing events such as the very last Playboy Mansion Party.

What would you consider to be your biggest challenge as a model so far?
Challenges are part of modelling full stop, and this is because our industry is very competit ve My latest challenge was being given four weeks to be ready for a shoot and I really had to focus to get my body in shape after recovering from a broken leg n,ury wh ch made me stay in hospital for over two months.

Do you feel more like a city person or a country person?
I grew up in the county, it was amazing Now I live in the big city and I love it. I think I have to say a bit of both!

Do you have a secret talent?
I'm rea ly good at giv ng massages especia ly with hot stones

A guilty pleasure?
That creamy, m.lky, me ting on my mouth piece of choco ate

What is your favourite word in any language and what does it mean?
'Amore' in Ital an, It means love

Any last words you would like to share with the readers?
Each reader is special to me, I'm here because of them so, I'd like to say Thank you

Follow more of Laura's adventures on Instagram @Laura_lydall and Facebook @ lauralydallau

OF
HUMAN
BONDAGE
BY JONATHAN TASINI

Around the world — forced labour is alive and well. Our correspondent meets survivors and activists striving to break the chains once and for all

ILLUSTRATIONS BY **JAKE FOREMAN**

Consider this. Just about every product you consume and every service you use is at least a tangential result of forced labour. Someone put his or her sweat into giving you something, and she or he did so not out of free will but because of fraud, coercion, threats or abduction.

Your clothes almost certainly came from a country where people labour for wages of less than $2 a day while enduring threats, beatings and hazardous working conditions. Your food — whether eaten at a restaurant, handed to you by a roadside vendor or purchased at a grocery store — landed on your plate thanks in part to farm workers who were victims of human trafficking. The domestic worker who cleans your home or watches your children may have been a teacher in the Philippines before being lured here by a bogus recruitment agency.

The International Labor Organization, which tries to police the global agreements banning human trafficking, estimates that for every 1,000 people in the world, 5.4 are victims of modern slavery. 16 million people in the private sector; 4.8 million (mostly women) who are victims of forced sexual exploitation; 4 million in state-forced labor such as prisons; and 15 million — virtually all of them women — trapped in forced marriages, which we don't usually think of as slavery.

In fact, modern-day slavery bears little resemblance to the familiar depictions of malnourished people in chains. Threats are mostly subtler than physical violence: If the victims don't comply, the traffickers can get them deported or make veiled threats against their families, which is especially effective with workers who have little contact with their loved ones. Traffickers can fill out all the proper immigration forms but mask the true destination of workers, knowing that enforcement is scattershot and the penalties minimal — mostly falling on the workers themselves. The forced labourers, who often speak little if any English, have scant knowledge of workplace laws, leading to stolen wages, exhausting work hours and arduous accommodations. And it's likely worse than current statistics would have you believe. According to Polaris, an international antislavery advocacy group, "the individuals whose cases were reported likely represent only a very small fraction of the number of actual victims."

If we want to eradicate slavery once and for all, we'd better start with a good hard look at the masks it wears.

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Jose Rodriguez heard from a friend about a job working state fairs in the eastern United States. Eager to make more than his meagre earnings in Mexico, he leapt at the opportunity. "The whole point of coming to the U.S. is that the little money you make here seems to be 10 times more than what you can make in Mexico," he tells me. So one day in 2010, the then 20-year-old left his home in the state of Veracruz, Mexico to join up with four other men on a day-long bus trip to a Texas border crossing. At the border-control post, a lawyer met the men and assisted their processing under the H-2B visa program, which covers nonagricultural temporary work. The next day, the five men flew to LaGuardia Airport in New York, where they were hustled into a van and driven to a state fair in New Jersey.

At the fair, Rodriguez would set up tents, lights and grills and do food prep. He often worked 12 hours a day, with no breaks except to run to the bathroom. It wasn't till he had made it through the first fair that he learned he would be making $400 for the week. "Because I didn't know English, I didn't know my rights at all," he says.

But working so hard for so little was only the beginning. The men, 10 in all, lived in a single-bedroom mobile home. They slept on small beds, one of which Rodriguez had to share with a friend — "family style," he calls it. They had no heat, no food, no working toilets or even running water. Electricity was supplied by a gas-powered generator.

When Rodriguez's last fair job finished, the trafficker hooked up the mobile home to a truck and drove it to Astoria, New York, where he parked the vehicle in a locked car wash. Then he left. The men were stranded without food or water and with no idea what would happen next. Eventually they managed to pool a few dollars, slip under the fence and buy some coffee and cookies. The activity raised suspicions, and thanks to the police and a nonprofit organisation that assists immigrants, the men were relocated to a nearby refugee hotel. When the trafficker arrived back at the car wash, he was arrested and forced to pay the men a part of the money they were owed. Rodriguez was able to get a work permit to stay in the country in exchange for agreeing to testify, two years later, at the trial of the trafficker. He is now a citizen.

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Although slavery has existed for as long as people have congregated into organised societies, today it's a $150 billion worldwide business. The problem is metastasising at a scale we've never encountered before due to three major factors: global commerce, war and the planetary climate crisis.

First and foremost, forced labour is an integral part of the machinery of the global economy. Most industries profit less from innovation than they do from a dogged reliance on lower labour costs. To that end, labour brokers feed an economic supply chain across continents, creating a tangle of relationships that stretches from the factory floor to the executive suite — all to create a sheen of plausible deniability about the conditions under which human beings work for pennies. Meanwhile, deals such as the North American Free Trade Agreement impose austerity on small producers who cannot compete against better-equipped and relentlessly cost-cutting companies, turning farmers into for-hire labourers. This system hums along unchallenged largely because unions, especially in the U.S., have been cut down in size and power.

Second, wars envelop vast areas of the globe and sometimes last for decades. Of the unprecedented 68.5 million people displaced from their homes by late 2017, 25.4 million are refugees who have fled because of government-sponsored armed conflict. The brutal civil war in Syria has generated an astonishing 5.6 million refugees, most of whom have fled the Assad regime's relentless conventional and chemical warfare attacks on civilians living in rebel-affiliated areas.

And then there's climate change. Human

rapacity and political dysfunction have intensified droughts and famines, bankrupting millions of already desperate people, especially in Africa, and forcing them off their small plots of farmland or from villages where wells have dried up and crops have withered. All those people end up desperately trying to scratch out an existence, making them prime targets for human traffickers, who are increasingly part of sophisticated organized-crime groups.

Global inaction or indifference has been a persistent obstacle. The 1930 Forced Labor Convention mandated an end to forced or compulsory labor, but eight decades later governments are still quibbling over how it should be enforced. In 2014, an update to the original Labour Convention passed, detailing new legal and educational steps governments and employers should take to end the scourge. But in 2018, Mozambique became only the 25th country to adopt the new document.

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Like Dorothy in *The Wizard of Oz,* Ronny Marty found himself not in Kansas, where he had been promised a job by a supposed recruiter in his native Dominican Republic, but headed to Huntsville, Alabama, crammed in a van with other bewildered workers. He had come to America for a $9-an-hour job at a Kansas hotel; instead, he ended up earning $7.25 an hour at a local manufacturer—an amount that dwindled to $40 a week after a raft of deductions demanded by the trafficker. Marty and three other men had to cough up gas money for the trip to Huntsville and $300 each per month for a tiny, shabby apartment. He also noticed that his visa was for only three months, not the promised nine months, which would mean more fees for an extension.

There was a point at which the workers were forced to pool their money just to feed themselves. "Everybody was pitching in, putting money there to buy the groceries, and I didn't have money," he recalls. "I sometimes stayed in my apartment and cried."

Marty got his freedom only because of the trafficker's greed. It turned out the latter was collecting the rent total from the men, paying the landlord half and pocketing the rest. When the rent was long overdue, the landlord became suspicious and connected the men with a local reporter. The employer threatened to have them deported if they spoke out, but Marty reasoned he had nothing to lose and told his story publicly. Months later, he gained permanent-resident status. Soon after that, he eagerly agreed to do something unusual: He become a member of the U.S. Advisory Council on Human Trafficking. It was unusual because most trafficked people want only to find a job and remain anonymous, fearing a system that could inflict more pain if they make waves. And fear, of course, is what keeps the trafficking wheels greased.

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It isn't just unskilled labour at risk. Noel Abalos was a teacher in the Philippines; he also held down jobs as a sports coordinator, a soccer coach and head of a school physical education department. Working seven days a week, he earned 22,000 pesos (equivalent to roughly $500) a month. "I'd been working my ass off," he says as we sit in a small coffee shop in Burlingame, California, just south of San Francisco. "I think I won't be able to give my children a good future, and my wife was pregnant back then, so I had to think of the future." He heard about an opportunity other friends had leapt at: to teach in the United States. "They were able to become rich so fast. They were able to buy houses that are nice, and they were able to send their kids to a prestigious school."

Abalos scoured newspaper advertisements for teaching opportunities. He finally found a local agency that seemed to have links with recruiters from the U.S. Before getting the first job offer, though, he had to pony up an ever-increasing amount of cash for various services, with the agency taking some or all of each payment. It started with an agency membership fee of 1,000 pesos, then a résumé-preparation process for 25,000. Each time an American human resources person would arrive, the recruits were dunned $200 for a "training class," which amounted to the foreigner marketing a U.S. school district. Then came a torrent of certification tests administered by U.S. school districts — each with its own price tag.

All told, Abalos says, he laid out $12,000 before he set foot in the U.S. He had to borrow $6,000 to cover the costs, at interest rates so high that he ended up owing $16,000 on the loans. Of course, the "authorized" lending firms were all in cahoots with the recruiting agency. While waiting for a job, "I had to find work just to pay for the interest," he says. He might have been lucky: A friend of his, Saturnina Encarnado, who would also be exploited by the same trafficker, estimated her costs to be more than $23,000.

And then he waited. Waited for the offers to come. Waited for shoddy visa documents to be corrected by the agency he was already paying. Waited for the chance to start climbing out of his deep debt hole.

He finally got a job offer in the middle of a school year. After shelling out money for his own ticket and agreeing to pay yet another $1,600 for three months of local transportation and lodging, he landed in Wilson County, North Carolina. Except when he arrived, there was no job. And to make matters worse, he heard that a group of other teachers he knew had been crammed into a van and driven to a building in Roanoke Rapids, North Carolina that had no internet, no phone and virtually no neighbours. The recruiter wanted to isolate them — essentially, to hold them captive — until he could move them into jobs so they couldn't report back to the Philippines.

Abalos was close to cracking, especially

A PIMP MADE HER TATTOO HIS NAME ON HER CHEST, AS HE DID WITH HUNDREDS OF OTHER GIRLS, TO SHOW OWNERSHIP.

because of what his wife was going through halfway around the world. "She's the one getting all the harassment from these lending firms and from the people we owed money to. She's getting distressed too. That, for me, was terrible. I was really at the point where I couldn't talk anymore," he recalls, his eyes moistening at the memory.

Still, Abalos was lucky. He and the other teachers were able to extricate themselves, thanks in part to the advocacy of GABRIELA Washington, D.C., a chapter of an alliance that advocates for the rights of Filipino women and teachers. With the financial help of a sister, he made his way to California, where he now lives. He has stood in line on the side of a road near a Home Depot to get construction gigs, worked as a caregiver and taken on some substitute teaching while he tries to get full-time teaching credentials. In some of the jobs, "I wasn't getting the rate that I was supposed to be paid," he says. "But you can't do anything, because that's the only job available. It's about survival. You have to survive."

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When it comes to sexual exploitation, there is debate about what it looks like and who is inflicting it. Ninety-nine percent of its victims are adult women and girls, according to the International Labor Organization; are they controlled by criminal organisations, small-time pimps or predatory boyfriends? It appears that in the areas of highest exploitation — Asia and the Pacific region account for more than 70 percent of forced sexual-exploitation cases — organised crime rings, sometimes modest in size, control a significant part of the activity.

Victims include women who find themselves working in massage parlours that act as fronts for transactional sex. In other cases, the reality can lurk behind a romantic veneer. "Sex traffickers are boyfriends," argues Lois Lee, founder and president of Children of the Night, a nonprofit organization (started with a grant from the Playboy Foundation in 1979) that provides services and advocacy for children and young people who are sexually exploited in prostitution worldwide. "The sex-trafficking thing is bullshit," she says. "These guys fill them up with this pipe dream: 'I'm going to build a business and I'm going to have a house and you're going to have my baby.' And these girls want what every other little girl is told she's supposed to want."

When I speak with Jocelyn (not her real name), she gives some credence to Lee's view. "It started off by running away from home," she tells me by phone from her residence in Dallas. "I was flushed through the system — foster care, group homes, juvenile hall. I had a friend who was in the system, and she was recruiting me even though I didn't realize it. I met this guy. We were hanging out, and he said I could make money. He took me to his home, gave me food, and he took my virginity." Within a few weeks, he had drugged the then 15-year-old. While she was unconscious, she was raped by multiple men, she says, who paid money.

Pimps came and went in her life, until she linked up with one who made her tattoo his name on her chest, as he did with the hundreds of other girls he controlled, to show ownership. "I portray myself as his girlfriend, but it is a business," she says. Today, 20 and pregnant, Jocelyn has moved off the streets, which were increasingly dangerous, and into a strip club. Although she can quit, she is still in many ways in forced labour. "The men are breaking the girls down so that even when they're adults that's all they know how to do," she says.

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Beate Andrees has been working on global slavery for close to two decades, brought to the issue by personal experience. Born and raised in the former East Germany, she had a friend who was imprisoned, for political reasons, in a forced labour camp. That sent Andrees, some years later, into academic research on the topic, which in turn led to a job for the German parliament and a lecturing position at the Free University of Berlin. In 2003, she joined the International Labor Organization, where she oversees its main initiatives to end forced labour. Her job is a strenuous exercise in global human rights diplomacy: trying to get governments, companies and the lower-level labour brokers to play by new rules.

When I press her about the perceived inevitability of human trafficking, she calls herself a "reasonable optimist." She explains: "A few years ago, before the Syria crisis broke out, we had worked with the Jordanian government on child labour for many years, and we were quite close to basically declaring Jordan child labour–free because they had taken very effective measures. Then the war breaks out, you have millions of refugees pouring into the country…." Result: Child labor skyrockets. "It's very difficult for parents to find a job. Usually the children get picked up by the labour workers, and they work on the plantations because they're cheap and available and there are no schools, with some exceptions. So it's a tough choice to make for those families, who are basically struggling for survival."

She points to a breakthrough, also involving Jordan. Unscrupulous brokers would typically recruit women from Nepal to work in Jordan

for apparel companies that were, at best, willfully ignorant of the rampant exploitation of workers. Once the women arrived, they usually found the pay to be half the promised $300 monthly salary, but many were too poor to return home. Enter the ILO and other partners, including companies such as Gap Inc. (which had been on the wrong side of the issue), and a program that essentially eliminates the middlemen and educates women at the village level about their contracts and rights. Now, says Alix Nasri, an ILO specialist based in Qatar, the women do not pay fees to get work and "are much more likely to understand the terms of their contract, are less likely to report being deceived about working conditions and are more confident in their ability to voice their opinions at work."

Another ILO approach is the economic carrot on a stick. As Guy Ryder, the ILO general director, told 1,000 CEOs at a June 2018 consumer goods summit in Singapore, "Businesses have a central role to play in fighting the global scourge of forced labour. It is not just the right thing to do, it makes economic sense too. Value chains that are free of forced labour are much more productive and sustainable than those that cut costs and whose workers toil in conditions akin to slavery." Ryder's point is that, putting morality to one side, low-wage labour turns over rapidly, forcing companies to constantly spend money to find new hires.

The Nepal-to-Jordan experiment, the tireless work of people like Andrees and the prodding of leaders like Ryder do make a difference. The number of child labourers, for example, declined by more than 94 million between 2000 and 2016 — though no one can explain precisely the reasons for the drop. Indeed, child-labour statistics can highlight the maddening challenges antislavery activists face. Because of insufficient funding for research, they buttress their arguments with data that is sometimes contradictory and incomplete. (The United Nations Office on Drugs and Crime database, for example, tracks cases only up to 2015.) They brandish international agreements signed by governments whose commitment to enforcing national laws ebbs and flows with time and shifting political leadership.

Overlapping, chronically underfunded and often competing, nonprofits do not have the wherewithal to scale up a Nepal-to-Jordan success. Without painful penalties such as long prison terms for corrupt or negligent executives — they must rely on the willingness of companies to obey higher standards. Every manager, up and down the corporate ladder, wants to show profits to keep their own job, and so a constant hawklike vigilance is called for.

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Ultimately, the only way to come close to shrinking human trafficking is to ensure that workers have real power. In the U.S. and throughout the world, even as they confront dwindling union influence, workers and their leaders are pushing back, sometimes looking to harness power inside new pre-union organisations. Populist uprisings in response to economic austerity have manifested themselves at the ballot box. Andrés Manuel López Obrador, who once led a mass refusal to pay sky-high electric bills, rode the long-term economic crisis in Mexico to victory in the country's recent presidential election.

The current efforts to end forced labour are crucial, but Andrees is clear: "The NGOs will focus on short-term assistance. You need to change the bargaining power. NGO work doesn't replace the need to invest in collective bargaining and the empowerment that comes from having your own organisation that engages in collective bargaining and also in social dialogue on policy matters with the government."

Still, because Andrees has to work with businesses, she is extraordinarily diplomatic, using slightly wonky language to telegraph an uncomfortable truth about slavery: It exists because workers are at the mercy of a harsh economic system and a set of laws that can't always distinguish between permissible and nonpermissible exploitation. It's a fine line between forced labour that violates international law and Walmart producing billions of dollars' worth of goods in Chinese factories that operate legally but pay people subsistence wages, if that. The law-breaking traffickers are always looking for the seam through which they can make a buck at the expense of workers — but so are Walmart and its corporate brethren.

Or to take it closer to home. Jose Rodriguez, Ronny Marty, Noel Abalos and "Jocelyn" fell victim to predatory traffickers who broke laws, but they were exploited within the U.S., where earning the minimum wage is a license to live in poverty. And every day, from the Supreme Court down to the factory floor, workers face a narrowing of rights that translates to smaller paychecks and less security.

In essence, the end of human trafficking will come when workers have the leverage in an ever-mutating economic system to make sure they get paid what they deserve. Just imagine: the demon of slavery exorcised from all the underpriced possessions that surround and sustain us. You can't put a price on that.

I'm sorry. This isn't working for me.

THE BAKKIE EVOLUTION

The real Mercedes-Benz X-Class is only a few months away

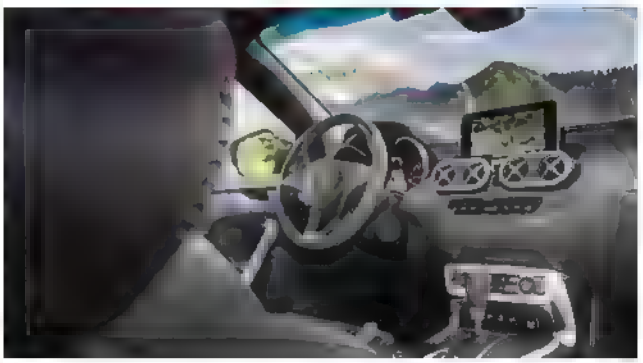
BY **JOHN PAIGE**

A new flagship to the Mercedes X-Class range is set to arrive in early 2019 with the quiet claim of being the fastest bakkie on sale. Men's Fitness tagged along to the international test drive in Slovenia where the high altitudes, similar to Johannesburg, and the gravel tracks converged in a similar proving ground to back home.

From the outside the X350d doesn't differentiate itself vastly from the lower spec models apart from some new badging amid other little flourishes. The three-pointed star still looms large, the headlights resume passenger car sleekness and there's a confluence of European contours that tie in with the rest of the Mercedes SUV range from which it takes its cues

Flagship status however is not attributed to the way it looks.

Mercedes, along with Volkswagen, are in a bakkie battle for performance, taking the once agricultural workhorse and transforming it with speed, agility and comfort. There's more emphasis on everyday driving across changing terrain than there ever has been before. As such, the X350d swaps the 2.3-litre turbodiesel, fitted to the rest of the

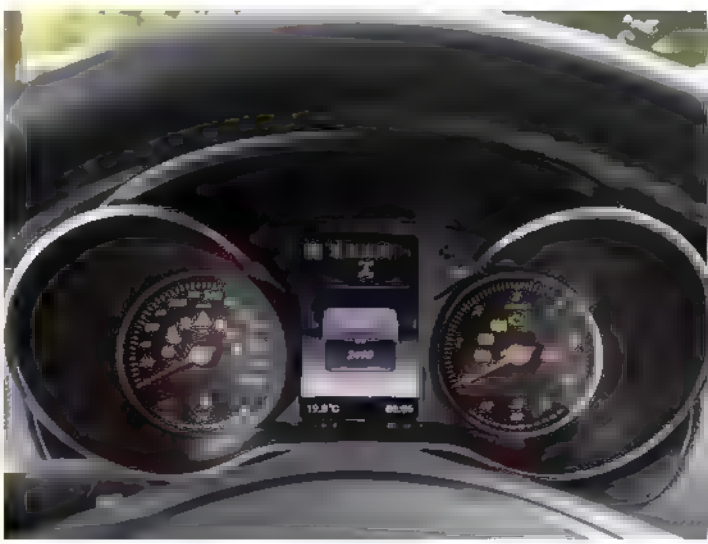


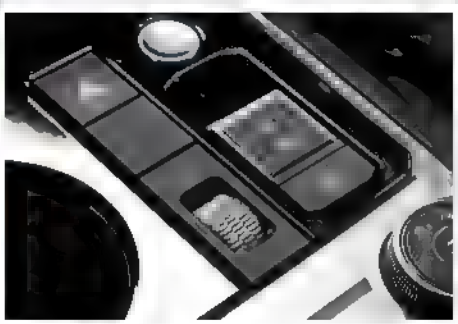
range, with a 3.0-litre V6 turbo diesel of mostly passenger car descent. The outputs sit at 190kW and 550Nm, 0-100kph in 7.5 seconds and a top speed of 205km/h linked to permanent all-wheel drive and a 7-speed automatic gearbox. To say the X350d is quick, is an understatement. Ostensibly the engine incorporates F1 technology. Bet you didn't think that would be a sentence used when describing a bakkie.

In theory, x350d is, for all intents and purposes, the true authentic X-Class. It shares far fewer components with the Nissan Navara the drivetrain is all bespoke Mercedes while the extra structural bracing now comes to the fore when paired with the V6 turbo diesel. And it drives remarkably differently compared to the underpowered X250d with that indolent gearbox.

On the move it's effortless and refined with plenty of in-gear surge for blissful overtakes. X-Class now drives like a bona-fide Mercedes a massive night and day difference from X250d. Yet it's not perfect because the cabin finish is still haphazard with insufficient storage space, some frailty to controls that don't look like they'll age well under tough usage and a steering wheel that still doesn't adjust for reach.

And while we can only speculate on price, it would seem a foregone conclusion that the X350d is going to become the first million rand bakkie, before adding extras. That's more expensive than the VW Amarok V6 turbo diesel with almost identical outputs. But at least this time, there's substance behind the badge





CRUISING SPEED

Touareg matures from off-road to digital luxury

Making practical, family cars is a bit of a VW speciality; everything from Passat to Tiguan and even Amarok but there is one car in the range that transcends them all That was the impression we got driving down from Port Elizabeth to Plettenberg bay where the Touareg's size, comfort and barrage of technology smothered the distance like a fortress on wheels

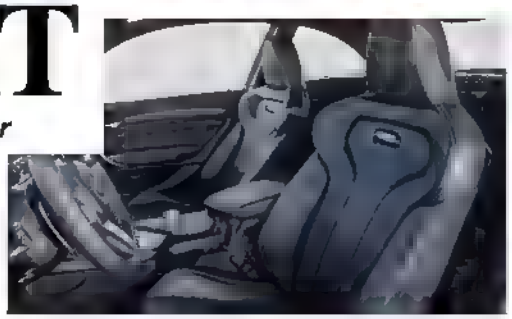
The 3.0-litre V6 turbo diesel pulls the two-tonne Touareg along with just the right amount of force without breaking through the cool cabin oasis. Consumption is around 9L 100km which considering the performance underfoot once again shows why diesel was once lauded the performance fuel of choice.

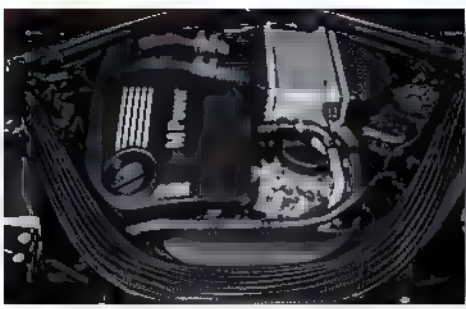
The rest of the package however lives in the apogee of development. The platform for instance is the very latest (shared with Cayenne, Urus and Bentayga) with clever anti-roll stabilisation and air suspension for road-holding precision.

Yet the real innovation is the cockpit, providing you have the extra money to spend on the options. The Innovision dual-screen setup stitches two independently-operated screens across the dashboard, swallowing all normal switchgear in the process and depositing it in a vibrant display. Couple this to the several driving modes (including autonomous) and Touareg really does bring out the best of both worlds

TWIN TURBO THREAT

BMW adds potent M gunpowder to iconic M2





It's now called BMW M2 Competition and it's the only M2 you can buy. As the name so rationally implies, this is the smallest, cheapest M car on sale, and BMW's sent it to the school of going fast around a racetrack although there is no M2 race series. Pity

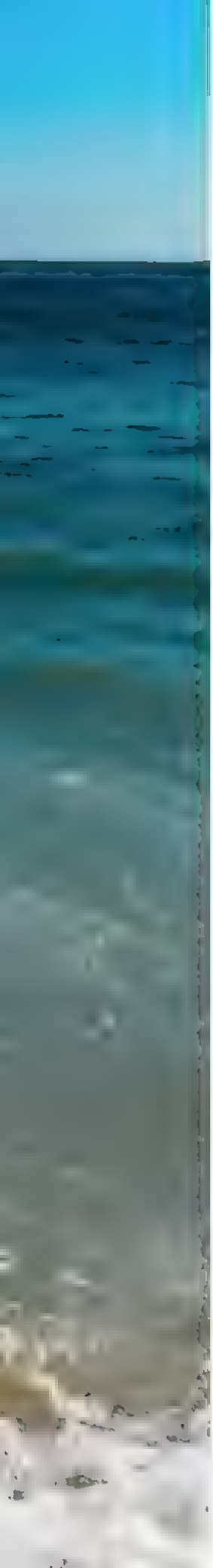
This is no mildly retuned BMW M2. Sure the cosmetic changes of black grille and bigger front bumper, new larger wheels may come across as superficial upgrades but the core of the package takes on real meaning with full-on M-Power

While the previous M2 was a blend of M componentry, this one has beefed up the hardware to become a true, truncated M4. Twin turbo charged 3.0-litre straight six and upgraded cooling put it on the same mechanical footing as the M4 but with its power clipped slightly to 302kW although torque is equal at 550Nm.

In company of Audi RS3 and Mercedes A 45 AMG, the M2 Competition's power moves the goalposts but boldly deviates from the usual all-wheel drive recipe. Around Spain's Ascari circuit, you'd have it no other way, M2 remains transparent and communicative with mischievous wiggles under hard acceleration. A real driver's car honed to perfection.

BMW M2 Competition arrives later this year in manual or automatic. Consider for a second M2's iconic status, while this one improves on it in every conceivable way. You want one

IV.I.MMXV



KÉTA

Photography by **RYAN DWYER** *HMAL* **BRIDGET MARTINEZ**
Produced by **MAINSTREETPRODUCTIONS** *Text by* **NELLY MADUNA**

Tell us something surprising about you?
I'm a published songwriter and I'm 1.78m without heels

Were you excited to shoot for Playboy?
So freaking excited

What inspires you?
My family, Art and genuine kindness.

Why did you choose to pursue a career in modelling?
Honestly, it kind of chose me but I'm so grateful that it did

Who do you look up to in the modelling industry?
Chrissy Teigen and Kayleigh Swenson

What are some of your hobbies?
Volunteering, eating tacos, working out so I can eat more tacos, traveling as often as possible and I write songs.

Name three things on your bucket list?
Starting a non-profit organisation that provides college scholarships for at risk youth, winning a Grammy and to see the seven wonders of the world

Turn-ons
I'm a sucker for a great sense of humour

Turn-offs
Liars.

Describe to us your perfect date
Probably a picnic (meaning tacos of course) on the tailgate of a truck under the stars

Which world capital would you most like to visit, and why?
I'm half Irish so probably Dublin.

What is your mantra?
If plan A doesn't work the alphabet still has 25 more letters.

Catch up with Keta on Instagram @iamketamusik to see what else she gets up to.

KICK-ASS

"VICES"

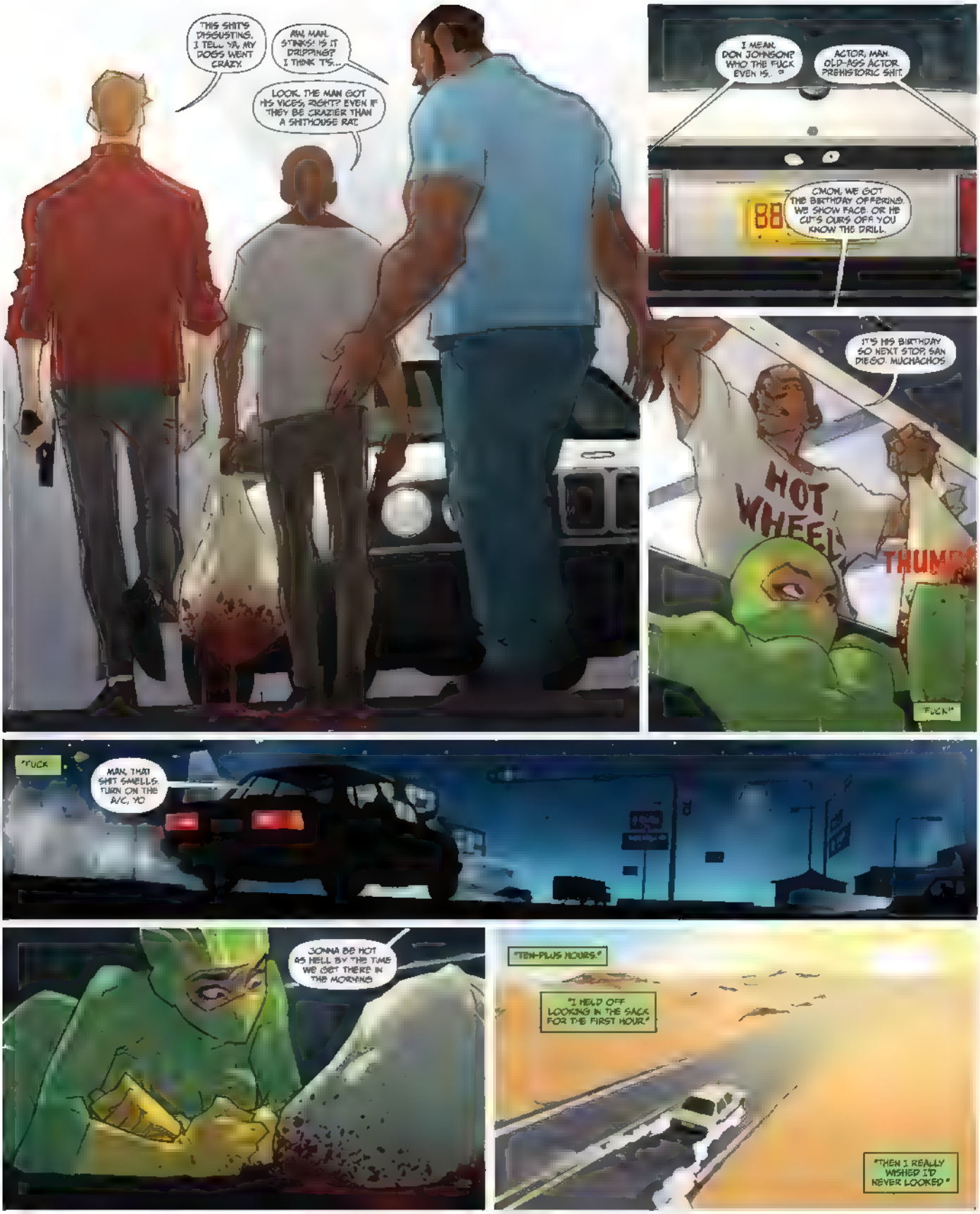
WRITTEN BY
Rob Williams

ART BY
Özgür Yildirim

ALBUQUERQUE, NEW MEXICO.

I'M REALLY SORRY, PATIENCE.
WE HAD TO SHUT DOWN THE SCHOOL'S BREAKFAST AND AFTER-SCHOOL CLUB. A BUNCH OF THE EXTRACURRICULAR ACTIVITIES AND SPORTS TOO.
BUT I NEED THE CHILDCARE, TONY. THE KIDS NEED THOSE CLUBS
I KNOW. BELIEVE ME, I SYMPATHIZE. BUT WE DON'T HAVE ANY CHOICE. THEY'RE SHUTTING THE LIBRARY. THREE TEACHERS GOT TOLD THEY'RE BEING LAID OFF TODAY TOO. MISS HAVENSTEIN WENT HOME IN TEARS.
IT'S JUST MONEY.
WE DON'T HAVE THE MONEY
"AND I'M GONNA DO SOMETHING ABOUT IT."

"THIS PLACE BELONGS TO HOT WHEELZ, A LOW-LEVEL HOOD. FENCES STOLEN CARS. BEEN STAKING OUT HIM AND HIS GOONS FOR WEEKS."
"MORE GUNS THAN I SAW MY ENTIRE TIME IN AFGHANISTAN."
"FIGURE THEY'VE GOT TO HAVE A SAFE IN THE OFFICE MIGHT BE 20, 30 GRAND THAT THE SCHOOL CAN."
WHUMP!
HOT WHEELZ


THIS SHIT'S DISGUSTING. I TELL YA, MY DOGS WENT CRAZY.
AW, MAN. STINKS! IS IT DRIPPING? I THINK IT'S...
LOOK. THE MAN GOT HIS VICES, RIGHT? EVEN IF THEY BE CRAZIER THAN A SHITHOUSE RAT.
I MEAN, DON JOHNSON? WHO THE FUCK EVEN IS. "
ACTOR, MAN. OLD-ASS ACTOR. PREHISTORIC SHIT.
C'MON. WE GOT THE BIRTHDAY OFFERING. WE SHOW FACE. OR HE CUTS OURS OFF. YOU KNOW THE DRILL.
IT'S HIS BIRTHDAY SO NEXT STOP, SAN DIEGO. MUCHACHOS
HOT WHEEL
THUMB
"FUCK"
"FUCK."
MAN, THAT SHIT SMELLS. TURN ON THE A/C, YO.
GONNA BE HOT AS HELL BY THE TIME WE GET THERE IN THE MORNING.
"TEN-PLUS HOURS."
"I HELD OFF LOOKING IN THE SACK FOR THE FIRST HOUR."
"THEN I REALLY WISHED I'D NEVER LOOKED."

AH, I GOTTA PISS, BRO.
GO PISS IN THE OCEAN, DON'T DO IT ON HIS DAMN BOAT WHATEVER THE FUCK YOU
THUNK!
(GASP)
AH.. AH.. I CAN BREATHE
I HATE THIS FUCKING SACK!
AH...
AH.
DAMN, I CAN STILL SMELL IT WHERE... WHERE ARE..?
PARTY MUSIC... IT'S A PARTY..?
IS THAT YACHT? .IT'S... NO WAY.
"IT'S MADE OUT OF GOLD?"

THE PARTY. THE BOAT. WHAT'S GOING ON?
I CAN'T FEEL MY BALLS, MAN...
WELL, I SURE AS FUCK AIN'T DOING IT FOR YOU. WHAT'S GOING ON?
"HIS NAME'S EL CAPITÁN MONDO COKE DEALER."
"IT'S HIS BIRTHDAY."
!$$$$ MY BIRTHDAY, BITCHES!
"DUDE'S CRAZY. HE REALLY LOVES THIS OLD TV SHOW CALLED MIAMI VICE."
"HE'S MODELED HIMSELF ON THIS DON JOHNSON ACTOR CAT."
"APPARENTLY HIS CHARACTER LIVED ON A BOAT AND HAD A PET ALLIGATOR THAT ACTUALLY LIVED ON THE BOAT WITH HIM."
"WHICH MAKES NO FUCKING SENSE WHATSOEVER."
"COCAINE. MAN. LOTTA COCAINE IN THE '80S."
WHERE'S HE KEEP THE KEY FOR THAT CHAIN?
DUNNO. HIS POCKET? THAT'S WHERE MOST PEOPLE KEEP THEIR DAMN KEYS... OW
GOOD POINT.
WHO THE FUCK ARE YOU?
EL CAPITÁN'S BIRTHDAY PRESENT. HE ORDERED A GIMP.
I... THAT'S PLAUSIBLE... BUT I DON'T KNOW ANY.

NAME'S KICK-ASS!
THWUMP!
AND I'M TAKING THIS DAMN BOAT!
WHO IS THIS? AN UNINVITED GUEST! AHAHAHA! YOU COME AT ME? YOU COME AT ME ON MY BIRTHDAY?
YUP
I WILL FEED YOU TO MY GUARD DOG, LITTLE TWIG!
ALREADY GOT A MEAL FOR HER RIGHT HERE.
I'VE BEEN LOCKED IN A CAR TRUNK WITH THIS SHIT FOR 10 DAMN HOURS.
I HOPE IT MAKES HER CHOKE.
KILL YOU! DO YOU KNOW WHAT THEY CALL MY DEATH GRIP?
MIAMI VISE, RIGHT?
I... YES?
OH, NO, NO! NOT SO FAST, LITTLE TWIG! PLENTY OF TIME FOR THAT LATER!
I'M SORRY
FOR WHAT? DYING?
NO. FOR FREEING YOUR LITTLE "DOG" AND TAKING YOUR OBSCENE FUCKING BOAT
BUT THIS IS ALL ABOUT MONEY

NO! ELVIS! NO! DOWN!
AAAAAAAHHHHHHH!!!
AAAAAAH!!
JESUS. I ONLY WANTED A COUPLE OF GRAND TO HELP PAY FOR SOME CHILDCARE AND A FEW LIBRARY BOOKS.
AAAAAAH!!
AAAAAAAHHHHHHH!!!
"SOMETHING I GOTTA LEARN IF I'M GOING TO CARRY ON DOING THIS KICK-ASS THING."
AAAAAAAHHHHHHH!!!
HMM... AN REALLY EXCLATE'
UH.
ANY OF YOU GIRLS KNOW WHERE I CAN SELL A GOLD YACHT?
ALBUQUERQUE. DAYS LATER.
I DON'T KNOW WHAT TO TELL YOU. SOME ANONYMOUS BENEFACTOR DONATED TO THE SCHOOL. THE LIBRARY'S GETTING AN UPGRADE. MORE TEACHERS ARE COMING IN.
IT'S A MIRACLE
THAT IT IS.
SCHOOL
OOH. NICE SHOES. BY THE WAY. ALLIGATOR SKIN?
THE END

Erica GORE

Photography by **BARRY BROWN** *Text by* **NELLY MADUNA**

Tell us something surprising about you?
I used to compete in ballroom and Latin dancing

Were you excited to shoot for Playboy?
Of course

What inspires you?
Risk. I love seeing people go after what they want despite the odds. I'm not saying to be totally reckless, but diving into something new without knowing how it's going to turn out, definitely gets my heart pumping

Why did you choose to pursue a career in modelling?
I mean what girl doesn't like getting pretty and taking pictures?

Who do you look up to in the modelling industry?
Tyra Banks is definitely one of my favourites because she used her modelling career to pursue so many other things

What are some of your hobbies?
Dancing, acting, and playing with my puppy Nylah.

Name three things on your bucket list?
Sky diving, travel the world, and go on an African safari

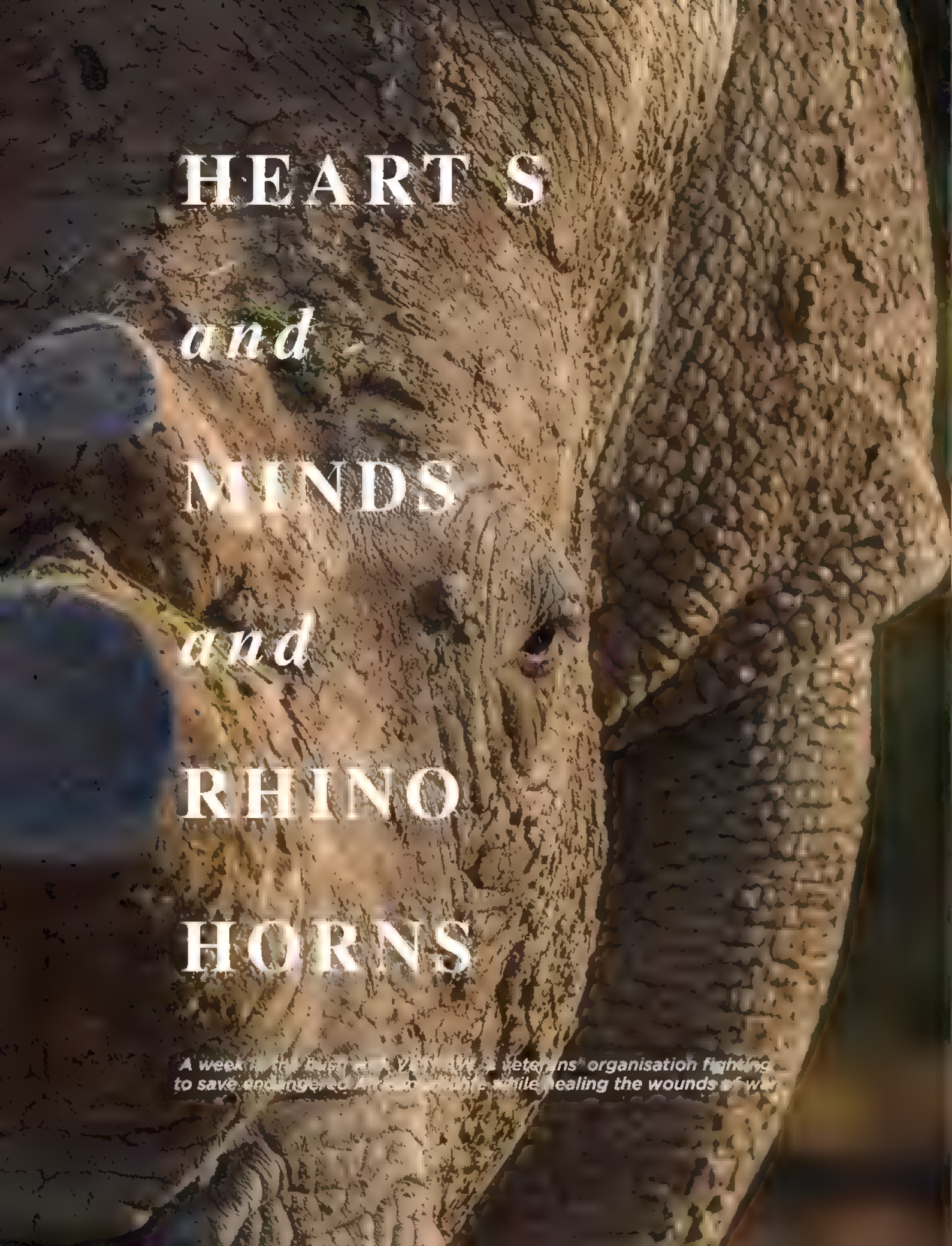
Turn-ons
Being nice to total strangers, and talking intelligently about your passion

Turn-offs
Texting all the time and smoking cigarettes

Describe to us your perfect date
Something adventurous. Like maybe dinner on a hot air balloon ride or anything with live music

Which world capital would you most like to visit, and why?
Rome! I love Italian food

What is your mantra?
"Head up, heart open!"



HEARTS *and* MINDS *and* RHINO HORNS

A week [illegible] veterans' organisation fighting to save endangered [illegible] while healing the wounds of war

It is just past one a.m. and I am deep in the South African bush with Ryan Tate, a 33-year old native of Fort Myers, Florida and former United States marine. We are following the perimeter of an electrified fence that surrounds a 26,000-hectare private wildlife preserve situated in the northern fringes of Limpopo province. Just over the horizon lies the trinational border between South Africa, Zimbabwe and Mozambique, a hotbed of smuggling nicknamed Crooks Corner.

BY **PETER SIMEK**

In recent years some denizens of Crooks Corner have been trafficking in a new and peculiar contraband, rhinoceros horn. Between 2007 and 2014 rhino poaching increased by 9,000 percent; some 7,245 rhinos have been killed in the past decade. Most rhino species are now endangered, which is why Tate is out here, under cover of night. In 2013 Tate founded Veterans Empowered to Protect African Wildlife, or VETPAW, an antipoaching security organisation staffed by U.S. military veterans who use the skills they sharpened in war to combat poaching in Africa. After launching in Tanzania — a rocky start, but more on that later — VETPAW has spent the past three years patrolling this private South African wildlife preserve that's home to all of Africa's "big five": lions, leopards, giraffes, water buffalo and one of the few thriving rhino herds left in the region.

Before landing on the continent, the closest Tate had ever come to African fauna was at a local zoo. Now he is one of the more controversial figures in the world of wildlife conservation. Some laud VETPAW for its innovative approach to the poaching problem — offering veterans a way to lend their military training to a peacetime cause. Others see Tate's organisation as a dangerous misapplication of American-style militarisation to an already violent corner of the world.

Tate is decked out head-to-toe in camouflage, a pistol on his hip. He points a flashlight at some human footprints alongside a tangle of impala tracks. He picks up a stick and measures a print. It looks like the sole of a worker's boot, probably belonging to one of the men from the nearby Venda tribal villages who slip under the fence each day to work on the property. But a second set of prints, thus one from a pair of sneakers, concerns Tate. They seem to have come from the same direction as the worker, and Tate knows that those villages are also home to suspected poachers.

Apparently animals aren't the only ones prowling the darkness beyond the fence.

• • •

Many veterans struggle to adjust to life after combat, but Ryan Tate wasn't one of them — not at first, anyway. He served in Ramadi during the bloody years of 2005 and 2006. He was the point man on neighbourhood patrols. Each time he busted down a door, it was "like playing Russian roulette," he says. But he loved his time in Iraq, it was "just like being a G.I. Joe." When it was over, he found a job on a security detail for the Department of State, where he served as a bodyguard for dignitaries including Hillary Clinton. As boring as it was at times, Tate took pride in the work, which matched his military training with a career that served his country. The only curious thing he noticed following his military tours was that he no longer got the same adrenaline kick riding dirt bikes.

Members of team VETPAW circa June 2018 with founder Ryan Tate standing second from left

Then, one Sunday afternoon in 2012, Tate was home on his couch in New York City, watching a nature documentary, when he saw shots of elephants with bloody stumps where their tusks once were and rhinos with their faces hacked off. For five days he couldn't bring himself to leave his apartment. He called in sick to work. He wept uncontrollably. He didn't understand what was happening.

Tate was angry, he wanted to fight. He wanted to fly to Africa and "kick some ass." But he also felt helpless, bewildered. How had he not known such horrible things were going on in the world? Why couldn't he do anything about it? It took him almost six years to realise that the rage and sadness he was feeling that week were bound up in emotions he'd buried with his experience of war.

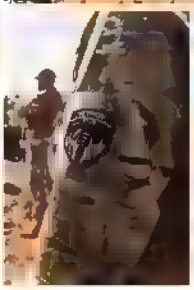
"It unscrewed the lid," Tate says back at VETPAW camp. (In the light of day, Tate has broad shoulders, thick forearms and an intense gaze, but when he smiles, his bearded cheeks flash a rosy red.) "You see a lot of things in war. You see children die. You see your friends die. You take lives. You destroy homes. You're sleeping at night and bombs are going off. Your next-door neighbour's house is getting raided and gunshots are fired and women are screaming. These people have to live with that. That wore on me."

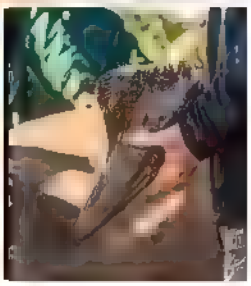
When Tate finally dragged himself back to work, he did so with a new sense of purpose. Somehow, he would get to Africa. He would recruit fellow veterans to join him, and together they would use their military skills to counter the poaching epidemic. He believed that a lot of things he and his fellow soldiers did in Iraq and Afghanistan — gathering intelligence, disrupting terrorist networks, conducting war zone diplomacy, halting the flow of contraband — would translate into the field.

It took a few months of leveraging contacts in the State Department to generate interest in his new venture. VETPAW's first break came in 2013 when officials from Tanzania invited his young organisation to train their rangers. Tate and five other vets dropped into the East African nation, where they resided in government housing, drove government-issued Land Cruisers and flew around in government helicopters. The operation focused mostly on gathering intelligence on poaching networks.

"I wanted to be a force multiplier," he says. "I wanted to take these park rangers and make them the equivalent of 20 park rangers."

The approach seemed effective. Working alongside local rangers, VETPAW managed to identify several poaching networks. Tate sums up their MO with a story: After rangers had apprehended a poacher, Tate came to have a talk. The suspect was a middleman, a guy who paid off local poachers with money from the larger syndicates that trafficked in the rhino horns. Tate saw an opportunity. As he had so many





Above: ETP [illegible] an get to them. **Opposite page**: The sandy earth offe[illegible]

times in Iraq, he sat the man down and asked him if he had a wife or kids.

"Yeah, yeah, I have two daughters," the man said.

"You know what, man?" Tate said. "I know that you were just trying to provide for your children. I know that you've got to put food on the table."

The man nodded. Tate continued.

"But what you're actually doing by poaching these animals is you're destroying the heritage and the future of your community," Tate recalls saying. "If you don't have these animals, your community will crumble and criminals and terrorists will thrive in this region. What you're doing by providing for your kids in a dishonourable way is you're taking away their future. You're actually not providing for them."

The next day, Tate says, the man led the soldiers and rangers to the homes of several other poachers.

• • •

The reason rhinos are being slaughtered in Africa is almost as incomprehensible as the drop in their population. Already established in China, a booming market for rhino horn has opened in Southeast Asia. Folk doctors grind down the horn, which is virtually identical in substance to the human fingernail, and sell the powder as a treatment for cancer and erectile dysfunction. These presumed effects and the amount rhino horn can fetch on the black market – upward of $65,000 a kilogram, more than gold or cocaine – have transformed it into a status symbol for the growing middle class in countries like Vietnam. It is an appetite that underworld crime syndicates are more than happy to satisfy.

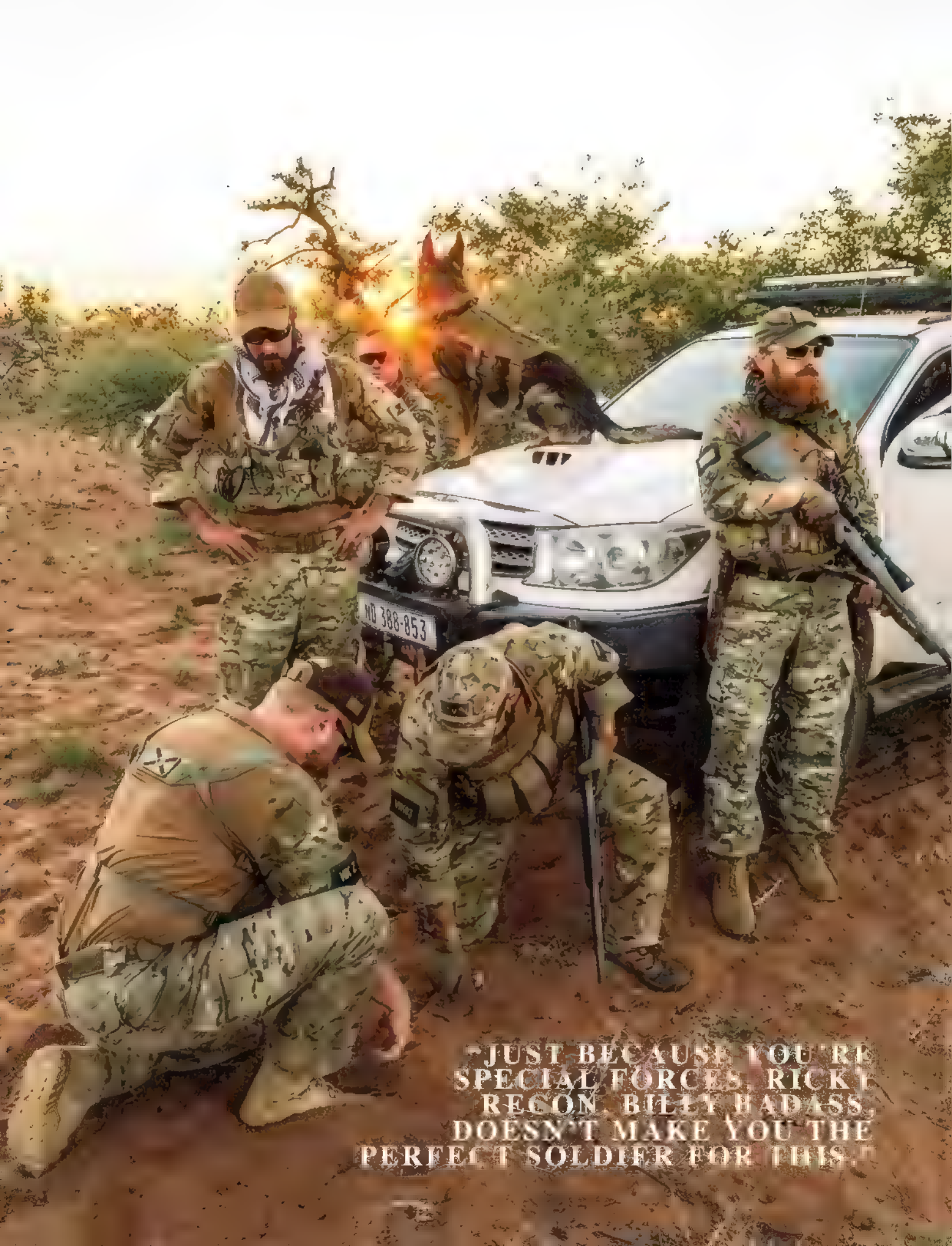
But the Southeast Asian market represents only one of the threats to wildlife in Africa, which has seen tremendous declines in populations of elephants, giraffes, lions and other animals. Natural habitats are shrinking as the human population expands. Political corruption often undermines official antipoaching and conservation policies. Different countries employ differing approaches to conservation, with varying degrees of success, and a crowded nonprofit and NGO sector struggles to focus on a singular strategy. The wildlife crisis touches on many of Africa's other crises, overpopulation, resource mismanagement, unproductive intrusion from well-meaning outsiders and deeply entrenched inequality that dates back to colonialism.

This is the world Tate and his veterans entered when they started working with the government of Tanzania. Tate soon discovered it was a combustible environment. In early 2015, just before they set out on the mission, a now former member of Tate's team named Kinessa Johnson gave an interview at the National Shooting Sports Foundation's annual SHOT Show in Las Vegas in which she said she wanted to "kill some bad guys and do some good." When the interview surfaced online months later, the Tanzanian government asked VETPAW to leave the country.

Johnson's comments struck a nerve with governments and organisations concerned that the introduction of foreign military personnel would further militarise the poaching crisis, which had already seen increased activity of heavily armed poachers in places such as Kruger National Park. Ever since the experience in Tanzania, Tate has been focused on refining his model – tempering the "kick some ass" fantasies he'd nurtured a few years earlier. He found the preserve in South Africa essentially by going door-to-door, looking for landowners who would accept free security services in exchange for providing VETPAW a base of operations. (VETPAW pays its veterans by raising money, mostly from American donors.) The goal, to create antipoaching teams that do more than conduct raids and collect intelligence. Tate wants to offer monitoring, security and training services that can be easily adopted around the continent.

VETPAW's rangers typically rotate through three-month deployments, at any given time four to six veterans are on the ground. The soldiers' days are framed by morning and evening patrols and shifts with Niall Bedzer, an Irish expat who runs the preserve's rhino-monitoring program, helping him keep tabs on the movement of the herd. After nightfall, they head into the remote corners of the preserve, sometimes spending days camping out in the bush. They are there to monitor intruders but also to send a message. "We like to own the night," Tate says.

Team VETPAW lives in a small house fitted out like a stage set from M.A.S.H. Workout equipment is scattered around outside, and a hammock is strung between the branches of a


"JUST BECAUSE YOU'RE
SPECIAL FORCES, RICK!
RECON, BILLY BADASS,
DOESN'T MAKE YOU THE
PERFECT SOLDIER FOR THIS."

massive baobab tree. Inside, the walls are covered with maps, whiteboards and signs warning of poisonous snakes.

Beyond the property's gates, the preserve is massive — two dusty, tree-dotted valleys that nearly span the horizon. Great journeys of giraffes, two herds of elephants and countless impalas, kudu, muskrats, wildebeests and water buffalo roam the landscape. Down the centre, a spindly mountain ridge is dotted with the clay brick walls of ancient Venda tribal ruins. One evening, Bedzer takes me up the side of one of these ridges to a rock shelter a hundred feet above the valley floor. Standing up to our ankles in baboon droppings, we see the faint outline of a rhino painted on the limestone wall — evidence that the giant mammals have been roaming these lands for millennia.

During full moons, when the sky is bright enough to navigate without a flashlight or torch, the patrols increase in frequency and length. But when the moon is in its first phases, evening life revolves around the braai pit, where the vets, most in their late 20s and early 30s, sit around a roaring fire while fresh springbok meat roasts nearby. The conversation drifts from black-mamba sightings to lighthearted ribbing. During the week I spend with the team, Ben Powers, a former Army field sniper, takes most of the punishment, thanks to his constant Tinder messaging.

Watching the banter, I'm reminded that, as much as VETPAW is an antipoaching outfit, Tate's group is also serving another mission. The organisation offers a way for these guys to recapture something of the camaraderie they knew during wartime, a less talked-about aspect of military withdrawal that can be just as demoralising as the sudden drop in adrenaline. In this way, VETPAW is part of a growing number of organisations that are helping veterans via unconventional means — from Operation Surf, which teaches vets to ride the waves, to Force Blue, which employs them to help restore damaged coral reefs. According to a major RAND Corporation study, nearly 20 percent of Iraq and Afghanistan military vets suffer from PTSD or depression, and 19 percent suffer from traumatic brain injury — and yet as many as 50 percent of those diagnosed do not seek treatment. For vets who may not find their way to clinical care or whose recovery is long and slow with problems not so easy to diagnose, organisations like VETPAW offer a way to process the lingering hurt that is the quiet cost of service.

"It's an empowerment thing for me, showing that these guys are more than just machines that go to war for the government and politics," Tate says. "The veteran skills that we're putting to use here, that's just one part of it."

The next day, I find Powers in camp, paging through a copy of Friedrich Nietzsche's Beyond Good and Evil. Life with VETPAW, Powers tells me, resembles deployment because of the regular patrols, the long hours in the field, the suiting up, the weapons and the communal life — but that's not all. Before he came to South Africa, he was working long hours for a steel fabrication company, getting up at four a.m. for his commute and crashing into bed around nine or 10 at night.

"There was not a lot of time to spend working on myself," Powers says. "When on deployment, there's a lot of sitting around and learning how to utilise that time productively. That military community, that military lifestyle is what I missed."

In South Africa, Powers has something you can't find in therapy alone. He has time to read, work out and socialise with peers who know firsthand what it's like to have lived in a war zone. And unlike many other military contracting jobs, VETPAW offers an opportunity to recapture something of the military life on a mission that isn't, as Powers puts it, "grey."

"It is a pure kind of mission," he says.

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Of course, no mission is 100 percent pure. The exile from Tanzania has left a mark on VETPAW that the organisation still hasn't managed to shake. Several conservation organisations I reached out to either didn't respond to a request for comment or expressed reluctance to speak about VETPAW. One representative said off the record that he didn't want his name in an article associated with the group. The Game Rangers Association of Africa wouldn't speak to me about VETPAW but instead sent a five-page statement. Without naming names, it lists a variety of complaints about foreign ex-military entering the antipoaching sphere, including a lack of coordination and appreciation of cultural and political issues, and a tendency in the media to portray them as "the answer to Africa's poaching woes."

We are sitting around a firepit at VETPAW's camp when I present some of these concerns to Tate. He rests his elbows on his knees, as he often does when the conversation turns serious. He says that VETPAW has reached out to countless antipoaching organisations and government officials. Mostly he has found the various player standoffish and territorial. He tells a story about the manager of a nearby preserve, an Afrikaner, who refused VETPAW's offer to patrol his preserve for free. The Afrikaner bragged about how he had killed a poacher on his property and had the situation under control. A few weeks later, all but one of his rhinos were slaughtered.

Still, the lesson of Tanzania is not lost on Tate. VETPAW has changed the way it selects rangers, and this summer it conducted its first training and recruiting event in Arizona. Over 10 days, veterans interested in joining up participated in a variety of training exercises, including role-playing scenarios designed to weed out hotheads.

"Just because you're Special Forces, Ricky Recon, Billy Badass, doesn't make you the perfect soldier for this," Tate says. "You're not in war. Even just a shot fired that doesn't hit anybody, those people are going to go tell the community, and then I got to answer to an elder. It can wreck everything. And certainly if you kill an innocent person, it's done."

Tate has also learned that success in this arena requires matching shows of force with acts of kindness. When VETPAW first arrived on the preserve, it was more common for nearby villagers to cross onto the land. Once, Tate received a call from one of his scouts that a suspected poacher was on the property. Tate went up in a helicopter with the game-preserve owner to track the intruder. They followed him all the way back to a village and brought the chopper down right in the man's front yard. It was a strong warning: There were new consequences for trespassing. A few weeks later, when the VETPAW team returned, they noticed the village well's water pump had broken. They came back and fixed it.

The spectre of a jacked-up army implied by the Game Rangers Association's statement

"IN REALITY, WHEN THEY'RE OUT HERE, THEY'RE NOT SOLDIERS ANYMORE. THEY'RE CONSERVATIONISTS."

Game capture: Over one dramatic week, VETPAW teams up with local antipoaching forces to transport dozens of animals to other preserves.

doesn't jibe with the VETPAW team members I meet on the ground. If anything, the organisation resembles a Boy Scout camp for grown-ups. When they're not on antipoaching duty, the soldiers assist the preserve managers in running the property, capturing game, administering medicine to the elephants with the veterinarian, and feeding and monitoring the rhinos.

"In reality, when they're out here, they're not soldiers anymore," Tate says. "They're conservationists."

It's all part of Tate's ever-expanding vision for how his organisation can not only save rhinos but also save veterans. He wants to add a garden near the barracks so vets suffering from severe PTSD can participate in horticultural therapy. He wants to expand VETPAW's footprint in Africa so more veterans can use their training for a good cause. To date, the group has been invited to set up a second base of operations at a private preserve in South Africa's Eastern Cape region. The team will include some who have experience running VETPAW's program and some new recruits. If all goes well, the new venture will demonstrate that the organisation's success at protecting rhino herds, as well as its operational culture, will be replicable in any number of settings.

It is perhaps not surprising that while other antipoaching organisations have cast doubt on VETPAW, private preserve owners have taken note of its potential. VETPAW's approach reflects Tate's blunt, clear-headed style. The complications around the various bureaucracies of the counter-poaching world — from governments to NGOs to protective personalities — he sees as noise. VETPAW can avoid all of it by focusing on a simple mission: protecting the rhinos that are placed under their care.

"We're just focusing on doing the work here and doing a good job," Tate says. "We've never had a poaching incident anywhere we've worked. Everyone wants to be the person who saves the rhino. I could give two shits who saves it. Just save it."

At the end of the day, the only real evidence of an antipoaching organisation's success is the health of the wildlife. Although for security reasons VETPAW can't say how many rhinos now live on the preserve, since the organisation began operating here the herd has remained healthy and is growing.

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Just as Tate's initial vision of VETPAW was tinged with G.I. Joe testosterone, my expectations of this trip borrowed heavily from war-movie tropes. But most of the action I see during my week with VETPAW is related to conservation, not confrontation. I watch the former grunts help the preserve managers conduct a game capture — a helicopter swinging back and forth across the bush, scaring kudu from the undergrowth and driving them miles across the property and straight into a set of massive green curtains, where hidden workers then herd the animals into the back of a truck. For a routine delivery of birth control to the elephant cows, the men spot the elephant herd and radio the preserve owner and the veterinarian, who swoop down in a helicopter and shoot medicine-filled darts into the scattering animals. "South Africans are the best helicopter pilots in the world," Tate says.

In a few weeks the vets will also participate in a dehorning. Rhino horns can be removed without harming the animals, and game managers have turned to this practice as a way of protecting them against poachers, who tend to shoot the animal and hack off its face, sometimes while the rhino is still alive.

By the looks of it, that gruesome scene will not play out tonight on VETPAW's watch. Back in the bush on night patrol, we track the footprints into a thicket not far from the fence line. They could tell the story of an employee who simply forgot to wear the correct shoes to work. They could belong to a villager who hoped to catch a little bush meat to feed his family. Or they could be the imprints of a poacher. After following the tracks in a circle, Tate decides they will check with the preserve's foreman the following morning to see if any of his men showed up to work that day in the wrong shoes.

The moon is waxing. In a few weeks, when it is full, poachers will likely begin to sneak into the property once again. For now, the VETPAW team decides to take advantage of the quiet night and head in early. On the way back to camp, we pass a spotted owl perched on a fence post, glimpse some water buffalo in the shadows outside the headlights and dodge multiple herds of impala emitting their low-throated groans as the 4x4 rumbles by.

Then, as we approach the gate, our spotlights catch the soft grey outline of two female rhinos and a calf standing in a small clearing. We pause and watch. They are strange, primeval-looking beasts, hulking bodies affixed to stubby legs. It's difficult to discern what Darwinian advantage gave birth to their awkward form, so strong and yet so vulnerable. They crane their necks, dragging their $100,000 horns through a few bales of hay that have been left out for them to eat. One grunts and stomps her feet, kicking up dust. The calf jostles for position before the feed.

They are oblivious to the veterans in camouflage, who are now leaning out the windows of the nearby car, mouths agape in silent awe. ■

Classic Cartoons

"That's it? That's all you do, bite necks?"

"Look! He's alive!"

"Ah, the pomp, color and excitement of college football! What better way to spend an autumn afternoon?"

"Shouldn't we be putting nuts away for the winter or something?"

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